

W. B. YEATS

# ..CTED POEMS

AN EVALUATION OF HIS POETRY

(.. a Detailed Consideration of Important Poems )

yeats

## W. B. Yeats

# SELECTED POEMS

*with*

Introduction Text, Meaning & Explanation

*Publishers*

**Kitab Mahal Publishing Co.**

Urdu Bazar Lahore.

*Published by :*

The manager,
Kitab Mahal Publishing Co.
LAHORE.





Price Rs Fourteen only





*Printed by :*
Zeeshan Printers
LAHORE.

# CONTENTS

# 1

## *Life and Works of W. B. Yeats*

### Birth and Parentage

William Butler Yeats was born at Sandymount near Dublin on June 13, 1865. His father, John Butler Yeats, was a man of strong opinions, but with no worldly ambitions. He was educated for the church, but while still an undergraduate lost faith in Christianity, practised as a barrister for sometime, and then became a painter with marked Pre-Raphaelite leanings. His mother came from the well-to do family of the Pollexfens, who lived at Sligo in the west of Ireland. The family was also related to the Middletons through Yeats' maternal grandmother. In his personality make-up, Yeats showed the influences of all these relatives.

### Early Boyhood

His father had to move his household several times between Dublin and London, and in the interest of economy the children were often left with their maternal grandparents at Sligo, where Yeats passed much of his early boyhood. He was often lonely and unhappy, but he loved passionately the hills, rivers, and lakes of Sligo. They appear and re-appear in his poetry and form its nature-background. It was also at Sligo that he heard the Irish Fairy-tales and folk-lore which he tried to revive in his early poetry. It was in this way that the natural and the supernatural blended in his imagination. When he was eight or nine years old his father read out to him *The Lays of Ancient Rome*, *Ivanhoe* and *the Lay of the last*

*Minstrel*, and the boy wished to turn a magician. His interest in magic dates from this time.

**At School**

In 1875, at the age of ten, Yeats was sent to the Godolphin School at Hammersmith. Yeats was unhappy at school, for owing to his Irish nationality he was teased and harassed by English boys and girls. He often thought of Sligo, and failed to concentrate on his studies. They returned to Ireland in 1880 and young William was now sent to Harcourt High School, Dublin. The father's scepticism had made the son also a sceptic, and he created a sensation at school by criticising Christianity and declaring himself a follower of Darwin and Huxley. However, his interest in science, was short lived and he soon came to hate victorian science, "with a monkish hatred."

**The youth—Awakening of Sex**

Yeats did not benefit much from his schooling. In later life he expressed his disgust for school life and a sense of waste. However, he read avidly the books which his father gave him—Balzac, Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, Byron, and the Pre-Raphaelites—and was deeply influenced by his reading. It was at school that the awakening of sex came upon him "like the bursting of a shell." He experienced a hopeless passion for a red haired cousin, Laura Johnson, who was already engaged to another. It was also during this time that he visited the island of Innisfree opposite Sligo, which is remembered in the exquisite lyric *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*.

**At the Art School—Friendships**

In 1884, Yeats joined the Metropolitan School of Arts, as his father intended that the boy should also take to painting like him. It was here that he met the well-known philosopher and critics George Russell (A.E.) who became his friend and shared his interest in Magic and the Supernatural. It was also at this stage of his career that he became friendly with Prof. Dowden, Katharine Tynan,

Dr. Hyde., John F. Taylor, and others who were to play prominent roles in his later life. More specially, his friendship with Katharine Tynan is of great significance for his letters to her throw valuable light on various aspects of his art and personality.

**The First Works—Interest in Occultism**

Yeats studied art merely for want of anything better to do. He did paint a little, and showed some promise, but his real interest was in poetry. While still at the Art School, he began to write poetry in imitation of Shelley and Spenser. His father exalted dramatic poetry and so Yeats wrote plays after plays with fantastic and incoherent plots. Mention may be made of such poetic plays as *The Island of Statues*, *The Seeker*, *Mosada*, etc., which were published in *the Dublin University Review*, and are not included in the poet's collected works. The Hermetic Society was founded in Dublin in 1885, and Yeats acquired a growing interest in esoteric practices. The young poet searched for some system in which he could believe and this accounts for his interest in magic, occultism and a number of other religious movements.

**Interest in Ireland's Past—Nationalism**

The Yeats family returned to London in 1887 and set up a house in Bedford Park, London. Yeats increasing interest in Irish folk-lore is reflected in the notes which he prepared in the London Museum for an edition of Irish fairy and folk-tales. The result was the *Wandering of Oisin and Other Poems* published in 1889. The volume shows signs of great promise. It is a landmark in Yeats' poetic career. It was during this time that he met John O'Leary, an important leader of the Fenian Movement. Through O'Leary he became acquainted with the works of such nationalist poets as Davis, Mangan and Callanan and

they inspired him with patriotism. He now joined the Young Ireland Society and was inspired to the devote himself to the patriotic task of recreating the past of Ireland.

**Meets Maud Gonne—Her Influence**

It was also John O'Leary who introduced him to Maud Gonne in 1888. The poet, only aged twenty-three at the time, fell violently in love with her. Under her influence, he became more and more deeply involved in Irish politics during 1897 and 98, and even joined for a time the extremist, revolutionary Irish Republican Brotherhood. The influence of Maud Gonne helped the poet to leave his dreamy, ivory tower, and come closer to life and reality.

**Politics—Disillusionment**

*The Rhymers' Club* was founded in 1891 in London and Yeats now came to know closely the members of the "Cheshire Cheese". (The Rhymers' Club met at an old eating house called the Cheshire Cheese and hence it was also called by this name) particularly, Arthur Symons, Dawson and Lionel Johnson. The result was his keen interest in aestheticism and the French Symbolist Movement. These interests are reflected in the volume *The Wind Among the Reeds*, 1899. In 1896, Yeats met Lady Gregory and the dramatist, J. M. Synge, who came to exercise a lasting influence on his life and poetry. In 1898, he became the President of the Woolf Tone Memorial Association and tried to unite the different political parties in Ireland. His experiences were not happy, in disgust the poet withdrew within himself, and this explains the introspective nature of the *Wind among the Reeds*.

**Yeats and the National Theatre—the Dawn of Realism**

However, this phase of withdrawal from reality was a temporary one. With the turn of the century, important development took place in Yeats' life and poetry. The event which had the profoundest impact on Yeats' outlook on life was Maud Gonne's marriage with John Macbride

in 1903. He was disillusioned with Irish Politics and politicians as a result of his experiences in the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Under Lady Gregory's influence he had been busy over the project of an Irish National Theatre. In 1902, an Irish National Dramatic Society was founded with Yeats as its President. When *the Abbey Theatre* was established in 1904, Yeats became its Producer-manager and displayed great organising ability. He worked in this capacity till 1910. He was involved in endless public controversi,es—the Abbey Theatre controversy, the controversy over Synge's play, *The Play-Boy of the Wester World*, and the Hugh Lane controversy—which shattered his illusions about Ireland and the Irish people. These frustrations, both personal, political and social, go a long way to explain the bitter, sardonic tone of the poetry of his middle period. The influence of Erza-Pound whom he met around 1913, and the study of Donne's poetry, were the other important events which brought him out of his dream-world into the world of men. All this change began with *In the Seven Woods* 1913, and is fully seen in *the Responsibilities*, 1914.

**Marriage and After**

The year 1916 is of great significance in the life and career of Yeats. Yeats refused a Knigthood offered by the British Government, and the Easter rising flared up. It took Yeats completely by surprise. An Irish Republic was proclaimed. Then there was Government repression, there were deportations on a mass scale and sixteen of the revolutionary leaders were executed. Maud Gonne's husband from whom she had separated was among those who were hanged. She was in France at the time. Yeats went to France and proposed to her again. and was refused as usual. Then he proposed to her adopted daughter, Iseult, and was refused by her also. Then the same year (1917) he married Miss Georgie Hyde-Lees whom he had known for some years. His marriage was happy and serene and Mrs. Lees exercised a healthy influence on the growth of the poet. She practised 'automatic' writing and Yeats spent hours in deciphering this automatic script :

on the basis of this script he developed his peculiar system of philosophy incorporated in *the Vision*, 1925, revised and enlarged, 1937. He had two children, a boy and a girl, and felt "more knitted to life." He purchased Thoor Ballylee, a Norman Tower in Galway, and set up his home there.

### Fame and Prosperity

He was prospering in life and gaining fame and recognition. In 1922, he was elected a Senator of the Irish free state, worked actively in this public capacity, and made solid contribution as Chairman of the Commission on Coinage. The award of the Noble Prize for Literature in 1924 was an international recognition of his greatness as a poet.

### Illness and Death

During 1927-28, Yeats fell seriously ill with congestion of the lungs. The first symptoms of tuberclosis were visible. However, by the spring of 1929 he recovered and regained his former zest for life. He again worked hard producing some of his greatest poetry with the result that he had another serious illness. He died at Roquebrune in France in January 1939. His body was brought back to Ireland and buried according to his own wishes in Drumcliffe Churchyard. His mind remained remarkably quick and alive upto the very end.

# 2

# *Chronology of Important Works*

## (a) Poetry

1. **The Juvenilia.** Immature boyish poems and poetic plays (1885), most of them not included in the collected works.
2. **The Crossways**, 1889, including poems first published as *The Wandering of Oisin and Other Poems.*
3. **The Rose**, 1893, including poems first published as *The Countess Cathleen and Other Poems.*
4. **The Wind among the Reeds**, 1899.
5. **Adam's Curse** and *the Folly of Being Comforted*, 1902, first published in *the Monthly Review.*
6. **In the Seven Woods**, 1904.
7. **The Green Halmet and Other Poems**, 1910.
8. **Responsibilities**, 1914.
9. **The Wild Swans at Coole**, 1919.
10. **Michael Roberts and the Dancer**, 1921.
11. **The Tower**, 1928.
12. **The Winding Stairs and Other Poems**, 1933, including the poems grouped under *Words for Music Perhaps*, and *A Woman Young and Old.*
13. **The Full Moon in March**, 1935.
14. **Last Poems and Plays**, 1936—39.

15. **The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats,** (Including all the above poems) edited by Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach.

(b) **Drama**

1. **Mosada,** a Dramatic Poem, 1886.
2. **The Countess Cathleen,** 1891.
3. **The Land of Heart's Desire,** 1894.
4. **The Shadowy Waters,** 1900.
5. **Two Plays for Dancers,** 1919.
6. **Four Plays for Dancers,** 1921.
7. **Plays in Prose and Verse,** written for the Irish Theatre, 1922.
8. **The King of the great Clock Tower,** 1934.
9. **The Herne's Egg,** 1938.
10. **The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats,** 1952.

(c) **Prose Works**

1. **The Celtic Twilight,** 1893.
2. **The Secret Rose,** 1897.
3. **A Vision,** Ist Edition 1925.
4. **A Vision,** revised and enlarged 2nd Edition, 1937.
5. **Autobiographies,** 1956.
6. **Mythologies,** 1959.
7. **Essays and Introductions,** 1961.
8. **Explorations,** 1962.
9. **The Letters of W. B. Yeats,** edited by Allan Wade, 1954.
10. **Letters to the New Island,** 1934.
11. **Letters on Poetry from W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley,** 1940.

## (d) Works Edited Or Translated By Yeats

1. **The Poems of William Blake**, Edited by Yeats, 1823.
2. **Irish Fairy and Folk Tales**, Edited by Yeats, 1893.
3. **A Book of Irish Verse**, Selected by Yeats, 1895.
4. **Gitanjli** by Rabindra Nath Tagore, Introduced by Yeats, 1913.
5. **An Indian Monk** Introduced by Yeats, 1932.
6. **The Ten Principal Upanishads**, translated by Yeats 1937.
7. **Oxford Book of English Verse**, selected and introduced by W.B. Yeats, 1936.

# 3

## *Character & Personality of W. B. Yeats*

**Yeats' Poetry : Highly Subjective**

In the case of Yeats, says *Jeffares*, "the man and the artist cannot be separated", and adds, "he drew much of his material from life ; his emotions coloured all that he read : and almost all that he wrote was subjective." For a proper understanding of the poetry of Yeats, it is, therefore, essential that we should form a clear idea of his character and personality.

**Personal Appearance : His Gentle Nature**

As a boy, Yeats was shy and wide-eyed. He was handsome even beautiful. Katharine Tynane was greatly impressed by his handsome appearance : "his dark face, its touch of vivid colouring, the night black hair, the eager dark eyes," and adds that when she first met him he was all dreams and gentleness. Those who have come in contact with the poet have attested to his open, generous, frank and communicative nature.

**Temperamental Aloofness**

His shyness, his temperamental aloofness, made his childhood rather unhappy and miserable. He needed sympathy and understanding before he could be at home with people and these were denied to him. The Pollexfens, with whom

most of his childhood and early boyhood were passed, were 'passionate' men of action and could not understand the needs of the shy and 'introvert' boy. Hence he suffered from a sense of loneliness and often felt wretched. He enjoyed life only when alone in the midst of nature, or listening to the fairy and folk-tales from the peasants who lived round his Sligo home.

**A Complex Personality Ambivalence**

Yeats had a complex many-sided personality made up of different strains. Yeats was, as a matter of fact, a boy, "caught between two worlds." He had constantly to shift with his father from Sligo to Dublin and from Dublin to London. He was a Protestant while the other Irish boys were Roman Catholics. There could be no mixing and no free inter-course with them. English boys and girls looked down upon him and often teased him because he was an Irish boy. This made him wretched. He felt a wistful yearning for the hills and dales of Sligo, and was often absent-minded at school. He was not considered a good student and this further increased his sense of isolation and inferiority.

For this he tried to compensate by assuming theatrical poses and considering himself superior to others. He would often stand before shop-windows and wonder if his tie really blew in the air in the Byronic-fashion. This feeling of superiority is reflected in the occasional arrogant and over-confident tone of his poetry. Mental conflicts and vacilations were prominent even in his early youth. The ambivalence within his own personality is reflected in the ambivalence or the clash of opposites in his poetry.

**His Many sidedness—Dualism**

He inherited from his father his imagination as well as his lack of wordly ambition. However, he had also inherited the Pollexfen business ability and love of action and this explains his success in the wordly sense in later life. He was a dreamer and poet but admired man of action. He

showed great ability and tact as manager of the Abbey Theatre. He also inherited from his father his scepticism. He had no faith in the Christian religion, but he also hated Victorian science with a monkish hatred. But he believed in the existence of the fairies and the spirit world, and sought for an intellectual basis for his belief. It is this search that explains his keen interest in Hindu Philosophy, Occultism, magic Theosophy, etc. The dualism in his personality is again seen in the fact that even in occultist experiments, he insisted on evidence, and was not prepared to accept anything without proof.

**His Integrity and Sincerity**

An important feature of Yeats' character is his absolute integrity. He was entirely unfitted by temperament for the compromises and intrigues of political life. "If he felt at all, he felt strongly", says *C.M. Bowra*, 'and then nothing could hold him from saying in the most trenchant manner what he believed". The brutality and violence of his later poetry is largely the result of this integrity. It is part of his recklessness, his zest for saying exactly what he felt. He was so honest that if he had some feelings he felt impelled to express them in the strongest words possible, and he said nothing which he did not really feel or believe in.

**His Intense Dynamism**

Another quality which stands out prominently is the intense dynamism of Yeats' personality. He was always battling with difficulties and enriching his experiences. He was always re-making himself, always growing and becoming different. He was intensely vital and dynamic even in old age : he retained his youthful zest for life, and activity upto the age of seventy-five. Even then he prayed for an 'old man's frenzy,' and wished to be, "a foolish, passionate, old man". Few are gifted with such a dynamic and complex personality. *Stock* beautifully summaries the manysidedness of his personality : "He had two sides. He enjoyed controversy and hated it as the enemy of his genius ; shunned popular applause, but half-envied popular leaders :

took the lead in creating a national theatre, and concentrated his own dramatic art on esoteric poetic plays which studiously avoided building on collective popular emotion." He was a social man, competent in business affairs, a good intellectual fighter who enjoyed battle, and he was always founding movements and championing causes : but in the end he would turn away from them and accept the loneliness essential to him as a poet, rather than the comradeship within his reach as a man.

**A Heroic Soul**

Yeats was a heroic soul, one who lived intensely and felt intensely, and who could "cast a cold eye" both on life and death.

# 4

# *The Irish Background to the Study of Yeats*

## The Significance of the Irish Background

Yeats was both of England and of Ireland ; his poetry is rooted both in the English and the Irish traditions. He wrote in the English language, and was influenced by the English poets like Shelley, Spenser, the Pre-Raphaelites, etc. But by his birth and temperament, by the accident of his upbringing, and also by deliberate choice, he was the poet of the Irish tradition. He has been called the National poet of Ireland. Therefore, in order to understand his poetry it is necessary to form an idea of the peculiarities of Ireland - Ireland as Yeats knew it—as well as of the social and literary trends of the England of his day. In this chapter, we shall examine his Irish background and in the next the English *milieu*.

## Ireland—A Spirit-Haunted Country

Ireland is different from England not only in her economy, religion, tradition and ways of thought, but there is something different in the very essence of the country, in the very earth and the sky. Every hill and dale, every river, every tree in Ireland is the haunt of some spirit or some ghost. Every inch of ground, every ruined tower or building is rich in local associations. "The living migrate but the dead stay on". It is a land haunted by shadows, spirits and memories, a land on which civilisation has

made but little impression. It was this spirit-world which enabled Yeats to burst on Europe with a new imagery, a new mythology, and new legends. His heroes, kings and fairy people are of the very soil of Ireland.

**A Peasant Country**

Ireland is mainly a peasant country. It is not even a land of villages like India, but a land of cottages standing in isolation by themselves. There are dim, dark forests and lush vegetation and landscapes with few traces of human habitation. It is a land of twilight', of dim uncertain lights. It is the least industrialised country in western Europe, and does not have much of a middle class. We have in Yeats' poetry pictures of sea-trading merchants inspired by his grandfather, George Pollexfen, but the factory owner and the big industrialists are not even mentioned once. It is as if they did not exist. The Irish peasants and the big landlords are the people who constantly appear in Yeats' poetry. The big country families were fast vanishing when Yeats took to writing. Of the big houses he writes much and has a nostalgic yearning for them. "The aristocratic bias is seen even in his early poetry in the cold, proud women, his portrayal of love as a grand, distant passion, in the subject matter, so frequently kings, heroes and their contentions" (*V. K. Narayan ; Menon*). He stands outside the industrial turmoil and this gives to his poetry a peculiar pastoral serenity.

**A Catholic Country : the Protestant Element**

Ireland is not merely a peasant country, it is also a Catholic country. While most of the leading families in the days of Yeats were Protestants, the people, the masses, were, and still are, mainly Catholic. The typical Irish landlord of Yeats' day had an inherited contempt for Catholicism, half social and half religious in origin. He was in general loyal to the British government, though it was from this very Protestant aristocracy that most of the leaders of the Irish revolution were drawn. He was self-conscious, proud of his old family, and so kept a little apart from the common Catholic people. Yeats himself

came of an old Protestant family, and this might account for his temperamental aloofness. The education was unscientific, the Catholic masses believed in angels, devils and ghosts, their Protestant landlords in their hatred for such superstitions and idolatry broke away completely from the common culture. Thus the Irish scene was a divided one, and this duality might explain the conflict of opposites in the personality of Yeats. He was, so to say, "caught between two worlds."

**The Masses—Their Pagan Faith and Superstitions**

Despite the advent of Christianitly, faith in the old Irish gods persisted. Superstitious practices, witchcraft and magic, had a strange power over the imagination of the people. The Irish tradition has it that gods lived in Ireland before the Gales came, that they fought for their possession of the country, and at last reached a sort of settlement with the invaders, and withdrew into the hills leaving the level plains to the Gales. There they are still supposed to live. It was also supposed that before the gods, there were darker powers who possessed the land, and some of them still survive. In this way, the land teems with gods and spirits who are known, respected and feared. "Their deeds in different places are remembered: history trails away into myth, and myth is projected forward into history" (*Stock*). There are fairy hills into which no farmer will dare intrude. The people are afraid to give offence to these supernal powers and try to placate them in all possible ways. Christianity still carries on its battle against this pagan faith of the masses, but with little success.

**The Political Scene**

Politics in Yeats' day was a powerful force in the life of the people. England ruled the country, and the rulers were often unsympathetic and harsh. The war of independence was on, the spirit of nationalism was on the rise, and people's thoughts were full of it. Children were told stories of English savagery and believed them quite

naturally. Irish leaders like O'Donnell, Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmett, were glorified and exalted sky-high. Their heroic exploits fired the imagination of the people. Their had been frequent, violent rebellions against England, and people had suffered, hunger and repression. There had been much bloodshed, The Black and Tans, the British mercenaries, had let loose a reign of terror and the memory of the people was, "Dragon ridden", and the smell of blood was everywhere. Everything took on a political colouring, and even poets like Yeats could not ignore it.

**Yeats, the Irish National Poet**

Yeats is the national poet of Ireland, not because he has written a few political lyrics, but because he tried to revive and express the very spirit, the very soul, of the country of his birth. He cannot be understood apart from his Irish background which forms the very groundwork of his poetry.

# 5

## *The Age of Yeats Or The Literary & Social Background*

Yeats began to write in the eighteen eighties while still a youngman of twenty-five and he continued to create upto the very end of his days. In this chapter, we shall first consider the social *milieu* in which Yeats matured and created, and then the main trends in English poetry at the turn of the 19th century and the first forty years of the 20th century, more specially those which influenced him and determined the tone of his poetry.

### (A) THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND

**An Era of Rapid Social Change—Rural Depopulation**

The year 1890 may be regarded as a landmark in the literary and social history of England. It ushered in an era of rapid social change, and this change is to be noticed in every sphere of life. By the last decade of the 19th century, there was a complete break down of the agrarian way of life and economy. It meant the end of rural England, and the increasing urbanisation of the country. The pre-industrial way of life had its own values, and its decline is reflected in the literature of the period. There are writers, like Hardy and D.H. Lawrence, in whose works we find a vague nostalgia for it, while there are others in whom there is a veering of interest towards urban and cosmopolitan themes. Most writers betray, in

one form or the other, a consciousness of the rapid depopulation of the country-side.

**Industrialisation and Its Evils—Public Morality**

Industrialisation and urbanisation brought in their wake their own problems. There have risen problems like the problem of over-crowding, housing shortage, a significant increase in vice and crime, fall in the standards of sexual morality, and a rapidly increasing ugliness. The atmosphere has increasingly grown more and more smoky and noisy, and city slums raise their ugly heads on all sides. There has been a loosening in sex taboos and an increase in sexual promiscuity, for public opinion does not operate as a check in a crowded city. The poetry of the period vividly reflects all these evil effects of industrialisation. However, the change has been beneficial in one respect at least : it has brought about a more healthy pattern in social relations. The victorian ethics of competition and money-relationship has given place to a new concept of social responsibility and social morality. The new age has seen the emergence of the concept of the welfare state : the society or the state is now held responsible for education, health and well-being of the individual. "Divorce to-day carries no moral stigma comparable to that of exploiting the poor, or of ill-treating a child." The sphere of social morality in terms of public good has expanded at the expense of private morality.

**Rationalism and the Spirit of Questioning.**

The end of the century ushered in an era of moral perplexity and uncertainty. The rise of the scientific spirit and rationalism, led to a questioning of accepted social beliefs, conventions and traditions. In matters of religion, it gave rise to scepticism and agnosticism. No doubt there was much questioning, much criticism of traditional beliefs in the Victorian era also, but the Victorian writer was not critical of the very fundamentals, of the very basis of his social and moral order. On the whole his attitude was one of acceptance. Dickens and

Thackeray are both critical writers, but they criticise only a few evils inherent in their social systems. Basically, they accept their way of life, and are proud of it. By the end of the 19th and the beginning the 20th century, we find writers like Shaw, Wells and Galsworthy criticising the very basis of the existing social, economic and moral system. As, *R.A. Scott James* puts it, "the 20th century has for its characteristic to put everything, in every sphere life, to the question and secondly, in the light of this scepticism, to reform, to reconstruct—to accept the new age as new, and attempt to mould it by conscious, purposeful effort." The wholesale criticism of the existing order from different angles and points of view, often opposite and contradictory, has increased the perplexity of the common man. Baffled and at bay, he does not know what to accept and what to reject.

**The New Psychology—Interest in the Subconscious**

This atmosphere of perplexity and confusion has been further accentuated by the long strides forward that the study of psychology has taken since the times of Freud. *Ferud* emphasised the power of the unconscious to affect conduct. Intellectual convictions, he pointed out, were rationalisations of emotional needs. Human beings are not so rational as they are supposed to be : their conduct is not guided and controlled by the conscious, rather it is at the mercy of the forces lying buried deep within the unconscious. His followers, like *Jung* and *Bergson*, have carried Freud's formulations to their logical conclusion. In this way, a new dimension has been added to the assessment of human behaviour and more and more emphasis is being laid on the study of the unconscious. The abnormal is no longer regarded as a sign of degeneracy ; it is now recognised that even the normal are abnormal and neurotic to some extent. This has had a profound influence on 20th century moral attitudes, specially in matters of sex. Thus Freud and his followers have shown conclusively that repressed sex instincts are at the root of much neurosis and other signs of abnormality. His theory of "the Oedipus Complex" has caused a sensa-

tion and is being freely exploited by 20th century writers. The study of the sub-conscious, even the unconscious, is a major theme of modern literature. Intellect is no longer regarded as the means of true and real understanding, and emphasis is placed on feeling and intuition. Thus Lawrence emphasises that the *feeling intellect* is the true source of knowledge

**Human Relationships—Need for Reorientation**

As a result of the teachings of modern psychology, man is no longer considered as self-responsible or rational in his behaviour. The theory of *The Oedipus Complex* mentioned above has had a profound impact on private and family relationships. Jealousies are recognised where no such imputations would have been made previously. *Hamlet* has been interpreted in terms of the "Oedipus complex", it is the theme of one of D.H. Lawrence's major novels and mothers are supposed to be jealous of their daughters-in-law. Sexual renunciation has ceased to be a theme of literature, interest in sex-perversion has grown, and there is a free and frank discussion of sex. Victorian taboos on sex are no longer operative. There is a break up of the old authoritarian pattern in family relationships, the assessment of the relative roles of the sexes has changed, woman has come to her own, and notions of male superiority have suffered a serious blow. "The war of the generations", of the old and the young, has resulted in a re-orientation of parent-child relationship. The great mobility resulting from the automobile and the railway train has also weakened the authority of the old over the young, and increased the rootlessness of man. The greatest problem of to-day is the re-adjustment of the human-relationships on the new basis of equality and friendship.

**The War—Reaction against Authority**

The First World War further strained the authoritarian-pattern of family relationships. The re-action of the post-war world has been to suspect all manifestations

authority. It may be called an era of revolt against authority. Political and religious scepticism, general disillusionment, cynicism, irony, etc., have become the order of the day. The dictum "Power corrupts" is a symbol of the revolt of the post-war generation. The temper of the age is 'anti-heroic', and 'action' and 'success' in a worldly sense have become questionable values. Interest has shifted from the "extrovert" to the "introvert". The hero in the inter-war novel is a person, to whom things happen : he is an 'anti-hero', a neurotic a "cripple" emotionally, if not physically. There is an atmosphere of moral unease and uncertainty, a collapse of faith in the accepted patterns of social relationships and a search for new patterns.

**Collapse of Tradition and Faith—An Era of uncertainty**

Though there has been an occasional revival of Christianity even in its extreme Catholic forms, as in the works of *T.S. Eliot* and *Graham Greene*, the 20th century under the impact of science and rationalism has witnessed a gradual weakening of religious faith. Religious controversies no longer exercise any significant influence on public issues. Moral and ethical values are no longer regarded as absolute. Philosophy and metaphysics, instead of concerning themselves with the nature of God, show a keen interest in the study of the nature of man. To Freud man is a biological phenomenon, a creature of instincts and impulses, to the Marxist he is an outcome of Economic and social forces. The pessimism and despair of the age is seen in the picture of man, "as but the outcome of chance collocation of atoms." Gone are the days of the Victorian optimism when man was regarded as essentially rational, acting in his best interests which, his reason was supposed to teach him, were identical with social good. The same perplexity and uncertainty is to be seen in the field of political theory. Socialism and internationalism have replaced the old Victorian notion of the supremacy of the whites. The entire gamut of imperial relationals has undergone a revolutionary change. Nationalism is no longer regarded as enough, and imperialism has come in for a great deal of criticism. The relations between the

nations of the world must be based on equality and mutual respect and not on the old basis of political subjection and imperial supremacy. The empire instead of remaining a matter of pride, as in the days of *Kipling* and *Tennyson,* is looked down upon with a sense of guilt. Thus *E.M. Forster* in his *Passage to India* advocates relationships between nations, as well as between individuals, based on equality and the feeling heart. Gradually, the 20th century has witnessed the dissolution of the British empire on which the sun never set, and the emergence of the concept of a world state. The establishment of the League of Nations was the first practical step taken by man in this direction. Nationalism is thus in conflict with internationalism, and efforts to reconcile the two have so far met with little success.

**Search for New Patterns**

The disintegration of faith and traditional beliefs had led writers, like *D.H. Lawrence* to seek refuge from uncertainty and perplexity in some, "mystic religion of blood," and *W.B. Yeats* to build up a personal '*System*' out of a strange fusion of magic and occultism. Authoritarian systems have found favour on the continent, and Marxism with its emphasis on class war has had a large following even in England. Marxism has provided many with the vision of a New Society which will replace the present one in the not too distant future. As *Arthur Koestler* emphasis every period has its own dominant religion and hope, and Marxist Socialism has become the hope of the early 20th century. Marxism has had a profound impact on social organisation. The aristocracy, already degenerate and corrupt by the end of the 19th century, has lost practically all power and prestige with the turn of the century. There has been an immense increase in social mobility, the profit-motive is condemned, and prestige goes with merit and education, and not with birth. Attention has been focussed on social and economic problems, and planned development is favoured so that there may be no extreme poverty side by side with great wealth. Thus the search for a 'system' or 'pattern'

has resulted in the emergence of Marxism and the concept of economic planning.

**Spread of Education—Fall in Quality**

The modern age witnessed a phenomenal rise in literacy. Cheap books, magazines, papers, etc., have been pouring out in their tens of thousands with the result that the spread of education has been almost universal. However, there has been a visible decline in quality. The old culture of the people expressed in folk-song, dance, rustic craft etc., has been destroyed. The cinema, the radio, the popular literature, full of crime or love stories, have exploited the people for commercial purposes. There has been an increase in vulgarity, brutality and coarseness. Human relationships have been coarsened and cheapened : man has become incapable of finer and subtle emotional responses. Further, the cinema, the television, and the cheap novel have fostered a kind of day-dreaming and a proportionately weakened grasp of reality. "*Many people live fantasy existences derived from the shadow lives of the screen.*" This lowering of tastes has had an adverse effects on art and literature. Bad art and cheap literature, 'pot boilers', have become the bane of the new age. The exploitation of the youth for commercial (as well as political) purposes has tended to assign to them a spurious importance, and hence the antagonism of the old and the young has been accentuated. It has become a century of the revolt of youth. Vigorous experiments are being made in the field of music and other fine arts, and literature, but this is a symptom of the break down of cultural continuity rather than of cultural vigour.

**The Consciousness of the Writer**

Generally speaking, the modern writer is intensely conscious of his social milieu and does not fail to reflect it in his words. How far the new age is reflected in the poetry of the period would be examined in the following section.

## (B) THE LITERARY BACKGROUND : TRENDS IN MODERN POETRY

**Tradition and Experiment—Complexity**

It is difficult to decide exactly as to when the modern age began and the Victorian age ended. In literature there can be no water-tight compartments, and no definite lines of demarcation separating the past from the present. However, the year 1890 may be taken to be the turning point, for by this date most of the great Victorians were either dead or had practically ceased to create. Much that is traditional and Victorian still persists and will continue to influence 20th century poetry, but the new revolutionary forces become more and more prominent and it is clear that the future lies with them. Twentieth century poetry is a curious mixture of the traditional and the experimental, of the old and the new. It is complex and many-sided.

**Abundance of output—Fall in Quality**

One of the leading characteristics of the poetry of the new era is the abundance of its output. The variety and quantity of modern publications is bewildering, and one is baffled by the variety of names and lables which are used. This abundance of output has naturally resulted in the lowering of quality. Much that is published fails to achieve the highest standards. Moreover. modern poetry is a poetry of revolt against tradition, and as such there is much in it that is experimental, ephemeral, and puerile. That is why *Roy Campbell* describes modern poetry as "an epidemic of intellectual and emotional diarrhoae", and *A. C. Ward* finds it, "eccentric, wayward, puerile and commonplace." There is, no doubt, that standards of poetic composition have gone down and there is much eccentricity and whimsicality, but there can be no denying the fact that some of the modern poets are of outstanding excellence, and the poems produced by them are of permanent and universal significance. It is an age of great poetry, but not of such dominating poets as Tennyson or Browning. The modern temper is too individualistic for

such domination. There can be no masters in the modern era. Each writes according to his own mood and temper, producing poems of merit along with much that is worthless. It is an age of anthologies which bring together the select works of several hands for the delight of the readers.

**Realism—Sense of Ugliness**

The new poetry is a poetry of revolt, resulting largely from the impact of science. This revolt is to be seen both in the form and content of poetry. Increasingly, the poet turns away from the decadent romantic tradition, a tradition which still persists in Georgian poetry. This revolt is best exemplified in the poetry of *T. S. Eliot*. The poet sees life in its naked realism, and even the most prosaic and commonplace subjects are considered suitable. "The heavy thud of bus traffic, the creaking of tramcars, the rattling noise of railway trains, the drone of an aeroplane, all these find their echo in modern poetry." The squalor and dinginess of an industrial civilisation are reflected everywhere. After the great war poems appear in an ever increasing number on the destructive means of warfare. The imagery and vocabulary of the modern poet reflect the influence of science and scientific inventions. Realism in subject matter has led the modern poet to reject the highly ornate and artificial poetic style of the romantics in favour of a language which resembles closely the language of everyday life. Modern poetry is characterised by the use of colloquial diction, speech rhythms and prosaic words. This realism in diction and versification is a marked feature of the later poetry of *W. B. Yeats.*

**Joy in Nature**

But this does not mean that the ugliness and murkiness of the machine age have lessened man's joy in the beauty of nature. For the modern poet nature is a box of toys which delights his heart and which is very dear to him. A deep feeling of love and joy in nature is a prominent characteristic of such poets as *W. H. Davies, Walter De La Mare, Edmund Blunden, etc.* However, the modern poet

does not spiritualise nature, like Wordsworth, nor does he intellectualise her, like Shelley. Rather, he is content to render her through the senses, and his rendering of her is remarkable for its realism and perecision in detail.

**Humanitarianism**

Nor does the modern poet love nature alone; he also loves and feels for the lower animals living in the lap of nature. He is moved by their suffering and makes a forceful plea for a more humane treatment of the dumb creation. Indeed, humanitarianism—a deepened sense of pity for the poor and the suffering—is a leading characteristic of modern poetry. The spread of democracy has made the poet more and more conscious of the dignity of man, and he perceives, "in the daily struggle of the poor the same potentialities of a spiritual conflict that the older poets found in those of exalted rank." *Gibson* in particular is the champion of the under-dog and the down-trodden. Even such outcasts of society as criminals suicides, prostitutes, drunkards etc., find a sympathetic treatment. Attention is focussed on their problems and society is held responsible for their degeneracy. *Davidson*, *Masefield* etc., are other poets who take pains to glorify and reveal the heroism of the mean, obscure, and squalid existence of the have-nots. Even the flesh, the body, the physical is glorified. Thus *D.H. Lawrence* considers "the flesh as being wiser than the intellect."

**Bitterness and Disillusionment—Inter-war Poetry**

The new poetry is realistic and the poet's consciousness of the grim realities of life has shattered all illusions and romantic dreams. The tragedy of everyday life has induced in the poet a mood of disillusionment and so the poetry to-day is bitter and pessimistic. The pessimism of the modern poet is more poignant and heart rending, even more than the pessimism of Hardy, because it arises out of the contemplation of the stark realities of life, and there is nothing sentimental about it. Thus *Housman* considers that the wages of man is 'dust', *Eliot* regards man as 'hollow' and 'stuffed', and in the Crazy-Jane

poems of *W. B. Yeats* "human sorrow becomes an elemental passion, profound, eternal and burning, like a flame." The Great War was a nerve-shattering experience, man lost faith in accepted values and as a consequence this note of bitterness is even more pronounced after the war. The horror of *W. B. Yeats* is expressed in *The Second Coming* where he expresses his belief that the present cycle of History is coming to an end and the Doomsday is near. However, this does not mean that 20th century poetry is a poetry of despair. As a matter of fact, the modern poet sees life as a whole, wants to face it squarely, and has no wish to escape from it into a world of dreams. He looks at life without the spectacle of romance and paints it as he finds it in all its ugliness and in all its misery and headache. Nor has he lost his capacity for laughter. Even in the works of the most pessimistic of poets, we find wit, satire, humour, grim jests and jokes. *Walter De La Mare, Masefield, Brooke, Davies,* are all capable of exquisite touches of humour. Sometimes, even serious subjects are treated in a tone of levity and flippancy.

**The Religious Note**

As a result of science and the spirit of rationalism, the poet is sceptical about God. *Hardy* laughs ironically at Him, and *Housman* does not hesitate to call Him a "brute or a blackguard" But this does not mean that religion is no longer a source of inspiration in the new poetry. In *T. S. Eliot* and *Francis Thompson,* we find a revival of Catholic mysticism. *Masefield's The Everlasting Mercy* has a religious theme and there are many fine devotional lyrics scattered all over the work. Even to-day there are mystical poets in the tradition of Blake and Wordsworth. Thus *D.H. Lawrence* has his mystic "religion of the blood" and speaks of strange, dark gods, and *W. B. Yeats* is a mystic visionary in whose poetry the gods and fairies of Celtic mythology live again. His vision of the future of civilisation is essentially mystical.

**The Metaphysical Note**

Besides the influence of science, religion and mysticism, many other influences are at work on the modern poet.

There has been a revival of interest in the poetry of Donne and the other metaphysical poets of the 17th century. *Grierson's* edition of Donne's poems was published in 1912, and ever since English poetry has reflected more the intellectual qualities of Donne's poetry. Thus we find in *Yeats'* poetry the same use of startling, far-fetched imagery, the same bringing together of opposites. The modern poet likes to startle and surprise, and thus to capture attention in the manner of Donne.

**The Romantic Note—Subjectivity and Symbolism**

Despite its stark realism in theme and treatment, there also runs a vein of romanticism in modern poetry, which has filtered through the Pre-Raphaelites and the Decadents of the nineties. We find this strain of romance in the poetry of *Walter De-La-Mare*, *John Masefield*, *Edward Thomas*, etc. De La Mare has a remarkable sense of the supernatural, and *Elory Flecker* excels in creating an oriental atmosphere, *Masefield* and *Yeats*, with all their earthiness, have the romantic longing for a more perfect world. They would like to escape into fairyland. Love, a dominant theme of the romantics, has not altogether died out. *Robert Bridges* has left behind him some fine love-lyrice, and *W. B. Yeats* has been called the greatest love-poet of the 20th century. Under the influence of French Symbolism, poets like *Yeats* and *Eliot* make extensive use of symbolism to communicate their visions and sensations often too complex and intricate to be conveyed in any other way. Such use of symbolism often results in ambiguity and obscurity.

**The Extension of Technique and Vocabulary**

Modren poetry has also been influenced by the techniques of music, sculpture, painting and other fine arts. The modren poet freely uses the vocabulary and techniques of the other arts. Thus we find *C. E. Cumming* reducing his poems to mere typographical designs, and the *Sitwells*, try to imitate the cubist painter. However, it is music which has exercised the profoundest influence. The *Sitwells*, for

example, care more for the sound than the meaning of their words. The variations and repetitions in *T. S. Eliot's, The Waste Land* are like the movements of a symphony, so much so that *I. A. Richards* calls his poetry, "the music of ideas." Like a musician's phrases his ideas are arranged, not that they may tell us something, but that their effects in us may combine into a coherent whole of feeling and attitude. The technique of the cinematograph is also exploited. Thus unrelated scenes are presented to create a dramatic situation, like shorts of unrelated scenes in a movie. The movement is speeded up and there are no connections or linking passages. Thus the poet to day commands a richer and more varied medium of expression than ever before.

**New Poetic Techniques : 'verse libre'**

The modern poet is constantly experimenting with new verse-form and poetic-techniques. The use of slang and colloquialism has become common, the language and rhythm of poetry approximate more and more to those of common speech, the bonds of metre have been loosened, and the use of *verse libre* has become increasingly common. No rules of rhyme or metre are followed, stresses vary according to emotion, and verse-rhythm is replaced by sense-rhythm. Symbols, often purely personal, are used in abundance to express 'pure sensations' and vision, and the result is increased vagueness and obscurity of such poets as *Yeats* and *T. S. Eliot*. Under the influence of modren psychologists, Freud, Jung and Bergson, the probing into the sub-conscious and the unconscious has become a commonplace.

**Some Innovations**

*Impressionism*, *Imagism* and *Surrealism* are some other innovations in 20th century. The *Impressionists* seek to convey the vague, fleeting sensations passing through their minds by the use of a novel imagery and metaphor. *The imagists*, headed by Erza Pound, aim at clarity of expression through the use of hard, accurate and definite images to convey their intellectual and emotional complexes. *The*

*Surrealists* try to express whatever passes in the sub-conscious, or even the unconscious, without any control or selection by the conscious. All this increases the complexity of modern poetry, and the bafflement of the reader. Such innovations may be dismissed as mere freaks not likely to strike any deep roots. However, the poet does not care for this : he is extremely sincere and writes according to his own conviction, without caring whether he is appreciated or not.

# 6

# *Influences on W. B. Yeats*

**His Many-Sided Personality**

Yeats' poetry and personality are complex and many-sided, the result of a variety of influences which operated on the poet from childhood onwards. In life he dabbled in many things, occultism, psychic research, Indian Vedantic philosophy, politics and literary battles, and his poetry shows the impact of his varied interests and activities. It is, therefore, essential to form a clear estimate of the various influences that moulded his personality, his views, his life, and his art.

**The Pollexfens : Their Influence**

The basic differences in the occupations and temperaments of his relatives among whom the poet grew up explain, to great extent, the antithesis within his own personality. His father, John Yeats, was constantly moving between Dublin and London, and so the boy Yeats had to past much of his time at Sligo, in the west of Ireland, the abode of his grand-parents on the mother's side. Their influence was at its height during the poet's early boyhood. Yeats tells us in his *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* that the first figure which he remembered and which had a powerful impact on his imagination was that of his maternal-grand-father, Willian Pollexfen, bearded and blue-eyed. He was a great sea-faring man, and the sailors in Yeats' poetry and drama owe much to him. The poet must have inherited his business ability also from him. Yeats often

confused his grandfather with God, and even in later life when he read *King Lear*, he always remembered him. He was a lonely, passionate man, and says Yeats, "I often wonder, if the delight in passionate men in my poetry and plays is more than his memory." This lonely passionate man—the image of his grandfather—appears again and again in Yeats' poetry. The poet's own "loneliness of spirit" must also have been derived from the same source.

**The Middleton's—Interest in Irish Folk-lore and Legends**

Yeats' maternal grandfather was a *Middleton*, a country-family having close relationship with country people. It was at her home that Yeats heard his first faery stories, and it was from her that he derived his interest in country myths and legends. The hills and plains around—Knocknarea and Ben Bulben etc.—entered into the very blood of the poet. Both the hills and the plains were full of legends —*the Cuchulian Saga* and *the tales of Fianna*—and hunted by faeries. The servants often talked to the child of the faeries and he thus acquired a growing interest in the supernatural. Once he heard strange sounds and saw a strange light moving up, and on another occasion he saw a supernatural bird. After this experience, he wandered about making inquiries into faery hills and popular beliefs. In this way, "love of nature blended with the love of the supernatural" and the poet grew up, "playful and full of lovely and elfin fancies." The Middleton's love for the country people and their interest in eerie spirits and legends entered into the making of the poet's character and is reflected at every step in his poetry. The Middleton's, too, were sea-faring people of great business ability, and the influence of his maternal grandparents accounts for the practical side of Yeats' personality.

**Father's Influence—Art and Poetry**

The poet's father, John Yeats, on the other hand, was poor and imaginative, having little concern with worldly affairs. He was an artist, author and philosopher and his influence was at its height in Yeat's youth. It is he who inspired his love of poetry, art and literature, and

moulded his literary views and opinions. John Yeats loved Blake and this love is reflected in the poet's mysticism and in the fact that early in his career he edited the works of Blake. The father's insistence on a distinctly poetical character, and on high vitality and vivid experience as a necessary equipment for the artist, influenced his son's personality and ideas. The father considered the poet as essentially a "solitary man", and believed that, "intense personal feeling is the substance of poetry, opinion is the substance of prose'. Yeats' own views on poetry are almost an echo of his father's, and, "his hatred of formulated opinions and generalisations need not be over-emphasised." The father believed that poetry results from a fusion of fact and dreams, concreteness and phanasty, and this inter-relatedness of facts and dreams, of reality and imagination, is one of the basic elements in Yeats' poetry and gives it, its composite character. John Yeats recommended that a poet should be all on fire with some emotion or 'impression', and he must work out that fire in his poetry with cold logic and be resolute purpose. This harmonious blending of intensity and cold astringency is an important aspect of the son's poetry.

**The Influence of Books—Literary Traditions**

The influence of books soon entered and blended with the influence of relatives and of the hills and dales, mythology, legend and folk-lore, of Irish countryside. Blake, Shelley, and Spenser were his special love, and had a profound impact on the mind of the growing boy. His notions of women are moulded on those of his favourite poets. They are all lawless women of wild passions, without homes or children. His father read out to him *The Lays of Ancient Rome*, *Ivanhoe*, and *the Lay of the last Ministrel* and this gave him a wish to turn magician. His father's agnosticism (indifference to religion) made him a sceptic. As a school boy, he showed some interest in contemporary science—the theories of Darwin and Huxley—but the interest soon faded away, and he came to hate Victorian science with a "monkish hatred." His father was a painter, and Yeats,

too, entered the Metropolitan school of Arts. Yeats preferred the pre-Raphaelite tradition in art : he believed that only beautiful things should be painted and that, "only ancient things and the stuff of dreams are beautiful." His early artistic training leads him as a poet constantly to create effective word-pictures. He ever tries in his poetry, to approximate to the art of a painter. The pre-Raphaelite influence had always been there on Yeats, and to this was later on added the influence of the French Symbolists and the English Aesthetes of the ninetees. Yeats' father exalted dramatic poetry above all other kinds, and hence Yeats' first creative experiments were in dramatic poetry. "He invented fantastic and incoherent plots and began to write play after play in the imitation of Shelley and Spenser".

**Occultism**

As the youngman grew up, other influences entered his life. At the Metropolitan School of Arts, he met *George Russell* (A.E.), the poet and mystic. Yeats was profoundly influenced by him, and the two became life-long friends. *The Hermetic Society* was founded in 1885 when the poet was twenty-years old, and he acquired a growing interest in esoteric (mysterious) practices. He searched for an esoteric system that would unveil the mysteries and establish communion with the spiritual world. Yeats' own mind had an affinity with Hindu thought and now, "it gave an intellectual justification to much that he believed with his feelings, and, helped to set in order the tangled experiences which neither Christian orthodoxy, nor contemporary science could deal with" (*A.G. Stock*).

**John O' Laery : Patriotism**

It was round the year 1890 that Yeats met *John O'Laery* a devoted patriot, fighter and champion of the Irish cause. He proved to be a guiding force in the young poet's life. It was through him that Yeats became acquainted with the works of the nationalist poets like Davis and Mangan and became their devoted admirer. He joined the *Young Ire-*

*land Society* and its debates inspired him with a patriotic urge, and he devoted himself to the task of re-creating the past of Ireland and reviving the pride of the Irish in their own culture. "His subject matter became Irish" Henceforth. Yeats became one of the prominent figures in the *Irish Literary Renaissance.*

**Maud Gonne and Her Influence**

Thus John, O' Laery made Yeats a patriot, a champion of the people's cause but above all he introduced him to *Maud Gonne* who brought into his light an "overpowering tumult". She was a devoted revolutionary, an active worker in the cause of Ireland's freedom. She was tall and beautiful with a well-chiselled "classical beauty," and complexion, "like the bloom of apples". Her influence on Yeats was threefold. As a result of his hopeless and frustrated love for her, the poet suffered long and intensely, and this suffering made him a great love poet. She inspired him with magnificent love poetry. She became his model and it was after her that he painted the beautiful woman both in his poetry and his plays. She became for him the archetypal Beauty. But above all, she helped and encouraged Yeats to leave his dreamy cloister and come closer to life. "The increasing awareness of reality and the hard texture that we find in his later poetry" owe much to her influence. She brought him into contact with crowds, with the Irish people and their day to day life, and the contact was good for him. She is the heroine of *The Count ss Cathleen*, a play which depicts with such reality the suffering of the poverty-stricken peasants who sell their souls for food. "His contact with the people and his role as a man of action had much to do with the profound mutations both in content and technique that took place in the poetry of his middle yaers.

**Social and Political Activity : Frustration**

As a member of the famous *Rhymer's Club* founded in 1891, Yeats came to know intimately the member of the

"Cheshire Cheese", including, *Arthur Symons* and *Lionel Johnson*, and could not but be influenced by them. After *Parnell's* death, Yeats laid in 1892 the foundations of the *National Literary Society* and devoted himself to the task of co-ordinating the different cultural and literary organisations in the country. Later on, he founded the *Irish National Dramatic Society* and then worked as the producer-Manager of *the Abbey-Theatre.* His efforts to harmonise nationalism and art were frustrated by constant wranglings and controversies and his mind was much embittered. The shattering of his illusions about Ireland and the Irish people accounts for the bitter sardonic tone of the poetry of the middle years. However, his pre-occupation with the literary revival brought much zest into his writings and for a time he openly advocated propagandist ideals for art. But this trend, it may be pointed out, is more obvious in his critical essays published in *the United Ireland* than in his poetry.

**Lady Gregory and the Irish Literary Movement**

To the multiple influences on Yeats was added the influence of *Lady Gregory* and *J. M. Synge* in 1896. Lady Gregory proved to be a lasting friend and many were the happy summers Yeats passed with her at her residence, Coole Park. She was to the poet, a mother, father, friend, sister and brother. She soothed, comforted and encouraged him when he was depressed or disheartened, and gave to his wavering mind a steadfast nobility. He collaborated with her in a number of plays, and he owed his interest in the movement for the establishment of an *Irish Literary Theatre* largely to her inspiration. It was with her that he went to Greece and Italy, and henceforth the art and painting of those countries became a part of his own poetry. Hugh Lane was her nephew and this accounts for the poet's keen interest in the Lane controversy. The bigotry and meanness of his countrymen reflected in the controversy deeply shocked and embittered his mind, and his bitterness is expressed in a series of poems with almost a Swiftian savagery.

**Synge, Ezra Pound and Donne**

To *J. M. Synge,* Yeats owed "the joyous ironical men" of his later poetry. His theory that, "before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal" influenced Yeats profoundly, and the terseness, and nakedness and the deliberate violence and brutality of his later poetry were engendered, to a very great extent, by the impact of Synge's views on his mind. He learned from Synge defiant gaiety and brutal irony, and the command of living speech which produced the magnificent poems of his later phase. The influence of *Ezra Pound* whom he met in the summer of 1913, and his readings in *Donne* further strengthened this trend towards directness and openness. Distinct presentation of reality with accuracy, precision and economy of language now became the key stones of his poetry. His theory of art under-went a radical change and he now believed that the poet must live a passionate life and express his emotions is simple rhythmical language. The poet now learned "to substitute men for dreams". "The intricate patterns of thought and passion in Donne's poetry impressed him greatly and he learned how to control the fury of passion and keep the reader's intelligence continually alert".

**The Irish Political Scene : the Great War**

Yeats' views on art and outlook on life continued to alter, upto the very last, under the stress of circumstances. The Easter rising in 1916, and the repression and atrocities which followed, deeply moved Yeats and he became despondent about the future. To these were added the stress and strain caused by the great war. His attitude was completely changed : he felt that the romantic Ireland of his dreams was gone for ever : and the hard, realistic tone of his poetry was further intensified. To these experiences we owe the heroic, defiant, ironical gaiety of the last poems.

# 7

# *Yeats as a Thinker*
# *Or*
# *Yeats : Philosophy, Magic, Occultism, etc.*

**Yeat's Search for a Pattern**

Yeats' poetic career coincided with that distintegration of faith towards the close of the 19th century which had such a profound influence both on the technique and subject matter of literature. Yeats was sceptical about religion as well as about Victorian science, which he hated with a monkish hatred. However, he had his own beliefs and convictions. Thus he was convinced of the reality of the fairies of the Irish folk-lore and regarded them as an essential link in the chain of being. But he searched for a pattern, for a 'system' which will impart coherence and unity to his belief. As *David Daiches* puts it, "The problem of Yeats was not that of finding what he ought to say......His problem was that of giving order and proportion to his insights". His was a search for a system rather than a search for a set of beliefs : he sought a mode of expression rather than a set of dogmas to express. It was this search for a pattern that led him to the study of magic, occultism, Indian Theology, etc., till he was able to formulate a system of his own. This system or philosophy he has enunciated in considerable detail in his prose work *the Vision* 1925, and later revised and enlarged in *the Vision*, 1937.

**Yeats' System : Its Peculiar Nature**

Yeats' system or philosophy is a curious mixture of philosophy, mythology, magic, occultism and symbolism. As this system is relevant to an understanding of his poetry, we shall briefly consider here some of its basic features.

**The Self and anti-Self : The Mask**

First of all, let us examine his doctrine of *self and anti-self* which had been there in his mind ever since 1907, and which is logically developed in *the Vision*. Within each individual there is a clash of personalities, each is torn by a number of opposite pulls within him. It is for this reason that the man desires his opposite and is irresistably drawn towards it. Obviously, Yeats was prompted to formulate such a theory by the manifold frustrations and failures, both in his public and private life. He writes, "If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are, and to assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves, though we may accept one from others." Active virtue, as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a code, is, therefore, theatrical, consciously dramatic, "the wearing of a Mask." This wearing of a Mask, "this second self," is important. While torn with conflict within, despite frustrations and disappointments, one must stil wear a smiling face and do his duty. In Yeats' poetry two types of men constantly appear and re-appear. One is a lonely visionary, and the other is "a half-devilish, half-ascetic figure" delighting in the senses, and together they represent the two anti-thetical aspects of the poet's personality. The anti-thesis between the real and the ideal, the body and the soul, the self and the anti-self, the recluse and the man of action, runs through all but the earliest poetry of Yeats. The poetry of the last phase shows that the anti-thesis has not been resolved, but there is ever an attempt at the reconcilliation of opposites with a cold, stoic detachment.

**Cyclic Conception of History**

Two other important features of Yeats' system are :—

(1) His conception of History as a cyclic process, and,

(2) His division of human personality into twenty-six types governed by the twenty-eight phases of the moon. History he conceived of as a cyclic process, revolving like a gyre or a wheel. Each age, each civilisation, has a period of growth and maturity, each reaches a zenith, and then distintegrates giving place to a new age and a new culture. This law of historical development is also applicable to the individual. A man has to pass through a number of phases corresponding to the phases of the Moon and then ultimately he decays and declines. Yeats believed that the present historical cycle has reached the stage of disintegration, and the future of humanity lies with the revival of such ancient modes as the Celtic or Irish way of life.

**Hammer Your Thoughts into Unity**

In one of his letters Yeats tells us that his three main interests were literature, a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality, and his constant effort was to, "hammer the three into unity". It was easy to reconcile poetry with nationalism. Through his treatment of Irish legente, myths and folk-lore, he tried to bring about a literary and artistic revival. He dreamed of Ireland as a country, "regenerating humanity by restoring an older tradition, more visionary in thought and more heroic in action". The two, nationalism and poetry, were welded together, when he used his poetry to make the native legends, myths and folk-lore widely known, or, in the words of *Stock*, "to create out of Irish life images of character and action to sharpen the discernment of a whole people." But it was much more difficult to fuse these two with his form of philosophy, which was concerned with the occult and the supernatural.

**Mysticism**

*Stock* beautifully sums up Yeats' mystic belief thus. There is a mind or spirit beyond the visible, and its external forms are the phenomenal world. In the same way, a

man's body is the form of his mind, which in turn is a form of the divine mind, as also are rocks and trees and water. "Since all things are the different aspects of the same mind, the divine, and mental life is continuous, not only may mind communicate with mind, but physical objects may retain in themselves the impress of thoughts and passions that have gathered about them, so that the universe is alive with memory." According to this philosophy, there is "a universal fluid mind" and gods, faeries, demons, stone, water and other objects of nature, are the different aspects of its thought. "All things must be thought in order to take form : and the human imagination is one mode, possibly the ultimate mode, of the divine thinking."

**Magic : Occultism**

This is neither science nor Christianity, but Yeats saw in this teaching the outlines of an older world-view which he sought to revive through his poetry. He explained its practical implications in an essay in the *Poetry and Tradition*. What is called Magic is in reality the evocation of spirit, *i.e.*, the power to create visions of truth in the depth of the mind when the eyes are closed. There are three doctrines which are the basis of magical practices. These doctrines are :

1. That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another and create a single mind, a single energy.

2. That the borders of our memory are also ever shifting, and our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

3. That this *great mind* and this *great Memory* can be evoked by symbols.

**Synthesis of Poetry, Philosophy and Nationalism**

In his search for occult wisdom, he attended spiritualist meetings, studied Rosicrucianism, and joined secret societies for the study and practice of magic. He used

symbols and incantations to put himself in a state of trance in which visions, perhaps coming from beyond his individual mind, would rise before him. He believed that an understanding, older than Christianity, survived in Ireland which linked men's sense of the eternal with the past of the race and with the hills and rivers around them. By evoking images from this great national memory, he hoped to restore to the soul its supremacy in the material world. It became the end of his poetry to evoke images of his country's past. and in this way to hammer into unity poetry, philosophy and nationalism. The business of his poetry, henceforth, became to re-establish "the old, confident, joyous world." A critic had taught a negation of life, that all desire is evil, but there is no trace in Yeats of such a rejection of life : *rather all his poetry is an affirmation of his poetic joy in the world and in the very act of living.* He did not find truth, as mystics do, by detaching himself from the world. His life and poetry are, "a movement downward upon life, not upwards out of life." "Oriental philosophy liberated him from what was uncongenial in his age, but he took from it what suited his inherent genius."

**Yeats' System : Its Impact on His Poetry**

Yeats' Pseudo-scientific-magical system may be traced back in its essentials to Plato and Plotinus. It is a mystic philosophy incapable by its very nature of rational exposition or intellectual analysis, and it results in some obscurity in Yeats' later poetry. But its influence should not be over-emphasised. Barring a few poems, the rest stand in their own right and can be understood without any reference to his system, though a knowledge of it is certainly illuminating and helpful.

8

# W. B. Yeats : Theory of Poetry

**Theory of Poetry : Frequent Changes**

Yeats is one of those poet who have thought and written much about the theory and practice of their own art. His views on poetry were expressed from time to time in his letters, introductions which he wrote to the works of others, in *General Introduction* to his own works entitled, *The First Principles*, and in his numerous prose works. A study of these pronouncements reveals that his theory of poetry underwent a frequent metamorphosis as great as his practice.

**Early Views : Art for Life's Sake**

In the beginning of his poetic career, we find Yeats in full agreement with the views of his father that dramatic poetry was to be preferred because it is clear and sharp in outline, while the lyric is vague and blurred. In keeping with this theory, he wrote poetic play after play with incoherent, rambling plots. However, his genius was lyrical and it penetrates even his dramas which are essentially elaborate lyrics. The bulk, even of his early poetry, is lyrical. Secondly, we find him advocating propagandist ideals and extolling the works of nationalist poets. He believes in the theory of "art for life's sake". He uses his poetry to revive Irish legends, folk-lore, myths and tales of heroism, and in this way to make Irish writers conscious of their past. He believes, "*there can be no great nationality without literature.*" By this devotion and single minded work, he colours the awakening Irish literary movement with his own personality."

**Pure Poetry : Art for Art's Sake**

But in the nineties, under the impact of the French Symbolists and the English Aesthetes, he swings to the other extreme and advocates the concept of "Art for Art's sake," and devotes himself to the writing of "pure poetry," a poetry from which all exteriority has been done away with. Poetry should devote itself exclusively to the pursuit of Beauty, and should have nothing to do with politics, religion, etc., and there should even be no descriptions of nature for the sake of nature. Poetry should express the "flow of sensations" in the poet's mind ; it should convey the visions of truth that rise before his mind, and this can be done only through the use of symbols. Further, he writes in one of his essays that the arts should liberate themselves from, "their age, and from life, and be more free to lose themselves in beauty, and adds that *poetry is not criticism of life, but the revelation of a hidden life.*" However, this phase of art for art's sake proved only a temporary one. He soon came to regard a body of poetry divorced from life as "sentimental" and "womanish" and expressed his dislike for a poetry which speaks with the sweet, "insinuating feminine voice of the dwellers in that country of shadows and hollow images." He regarded such a poetry as decadent, and was determined to fight against it.

**The Last Phase : Reconciliation of Art with Life**

Thus Yeats expressed two different views on poetry at two different periods of his career. Such extreme views arise from a faulty understanding of the relation between art and life. Art is neither divorce from life and morality nor a mere imitation of reality. As a matter of fact, the artist derives his impressions from reality, but they are transformed and coloured by his imagination. The impressions derived from reality thus acquire a distinct life and tone of their own, which results from a fusion of fact and fantasy. The poet lives in the real as well as in the imaginary. Yeats realised this truth only in his last phase, and his later poetry gives us a nice fusion of the real and the ideal, of fact and fiction.

**Emphasis on past culture**

In his later phase, while condemning the modern realist who mistakes "the circumference for the centre", Yeats insists again and again on the need for contact with the people, on living, individual speech. He further advocates that the life of the present must be interwoven with the life of past by the synthetic power of the poet's imagination. True poetry must be rooted both in the life of the past and the present. *Literature must be, "flooded with the passions and beliefs of ancient times, otherwise it is a mere chornicle."* Traditions of the past are a rich heritage for the modern poet, and, "*works of art are always begotten by previous works of art.*" Beneath the conscious, there is the sub-conscious and the un-conscious which is made up not of individual experiences alone but also of the experinces of his ancestors, and which must be stirred, if a work of art is to be really effective. This stirring can be achieved by the use of ancient myths and symbols, and Yeats succeeds in achieving it in his later poetry.

**Fusion of the Personal with the Impersonal**

All great poetry is personal in the sense that all observation and experience, before they become fit subjects for poetry, must pass through the transforming process of the poet's imagination. An experience must fertilise the poet's imagination and become a part and parcel of his personality or in Yeats' words "must be felt in the marrow-bone," before really great poetry can be possible. The poet is essentially a *solitary man*, standing aloof from the common run of mankind and rendering his inner self—the essential man—in his poetry. "*Literature is always personal, always one man's vision of the word, one man's experience.*" But there must be a fusion of the impersonal with the personal, of the objective with the subjective before really great poetry can be born and the charm and greatness of Yeats' later poems results from exactly such a fusion.

**Artistic Sincerity and Integrity**

Yeats was a born poet and had a high conception of his calling. He believed that a poet must, above every

thing else, be sincere and express only what he really and sincerely believes in. He valued artistic integrity most of all. A poet is essentially a visionary and he must remain true to his vision. In his own practice, he did not hesitate to express even unpleasant truths in a blunt, forthright manner. Poetry, according to him, "is the commonsense of the soul : it distinguishes greatness from triviality, mere fancifulness from beauty that lights up the deeps of thought." He might have had a philosophy or system of his own, but it never came in the way of his poetry he used it only when it, "made poetic good sense."

9

# *The Evolution of Yeats' Genius Or The Growth and Development of Yeats' Art and Poetry*

**Yeats' Poetry : Continuity of Growth**

It was on the occasion of Yeats' 70th birthday that *T. S. Eliot* made his famous remark, "I can think of no poet, not even the greatest, who has shown a longer period of development than Yeats. Development to this extent is not merely genius, it is character." Yeats enjoyed a long creative span,—his period of active literary production covers a period of roughly over fifty years—much longer even than that enjoyed by poets like Wordsworth and Tennyson. During all this period of fertility, Yeats' art and genius were constantly maturing and developing. His later poetry shows an immense advance over the earlier one. However, this does not mean that his later poetry is something entirely different from the earlier one, or that there is any opposition between the two. As a matter of fact, his poetry displays an organic and continuous growth, and the germs of the later art are to be found right from the very beginning. Some critic has nicely puts it, "His later work represents the consummation of a long and fruitful poetic career and is a reminder to us of how a poet can and should develop." It is this continuity of growth and organic relationship which is emphasised by critics like *Kenner* and *Unterecker* when they point out that

Yeats' collected poems must be read as a whole, for each poem gains in richness and significance by being set among the poems that surround it. *The Collected Poems* forms a consciously shaped universe in which each part sheds light on the whole and is in its own turn illuminated by its setting in the whole. Each poem has its own life and individuality, but if it is to be rightly appreciated it must also be seen as the part of a community which it helps to create and interpret.

**The Four Phases of His Poetic Career**

Thus Yeats' later poetry grows out of the earlier, and is its continuation and fulfilment. This growth and evolution was achieved by a process of slow, easy, transition, and not abrubtly or suddenly. Certain elements were dropped out or lost their significance while certain other elements were added or emphasised. The process of transition was a long one and hence it is that *R. A. Scott-James* is justified in pointing out that Yeats' poetry has a beginning, a middle, and an end, like a Greek drama, and it is the beginning and the end which are more prominent and significant. It is only for the sake of convenience—and not that any such clevage or lack of continuity exists—that we may divide Yeats' poetry into four parts, each part being a link in the chain of Yeats' evolution as one of the greatest poet of England. These four phases of his poetic career are :—

(*a*) *The Celtic Twilight period.* The term, borrowed from Yeats' prose romance, *The Celtic Twilight*, is used for the earliest poetry of Yeats. This *Early Poetry* includes poems published in *The Crossways* (1889), *The Rose* (1893), and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899).

(*b*) The poems of *the Middle or Realistic period*, which is essentially a period of transition. To this transition period belong the poems published *In The Seven Woods* (1904), *The Green Halmet and Other Poems* (1910), and *Responsibilities* (1914).

(*c*) *The rich and complex later period of full maturity.* This is the period of Yeats' poetic manhood and his greatest claim to immortality. The chief poems of this period are included in *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), *Michael Robert and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928), *The Winding Stair and other poems* (1933), *including the Words for Music Perhaps, and the Crazy-Jane* group of poems.

(*d*) *The Last Phase*, covering the poems of Yeats' last years published as *Last Poems and Plays* (1936-39).

A study of this large body of poetry spread over a period of more than fifty years shows a significant, continuous and consistent development. This evolution is to be seen both in theme, tone and technique, and this fact of constant growth makes a comparative study of Yeats' early and later poetry so profitable and fascinating.

**Early Themes**

Yeats' early poetry, the poetry of the Celtic Twilight period, is frankly escapist. It is pre-Raphaelite and romantic : it has a Shelleyian fluidity and Keatsian richness of colour. From the ordinary world of harsh reality the poet escapes into a dream-world of Irish legend, mythology and folk-lore. The young Yeats lives much in fairyland, and his heroes, Oisin, Red Hanrahan, 'the man who dreamed of fairyland ,' etc., are always deserting the real world for the world of *the Sidhe*, *Daanan Children*, *the Druids*, and the fairies of common superstition. The real world is an unsatisfactory world, a world "more full of weeping than you can understand," and so mortals escape to fairyland where they dance on twilit lawns to strange music. As *Edmund Wilson* notes, the Irish fairies of Yeats are not the fairies of an ordinary folk-tale with which we are familiar, they are different, existing in a different world altogether. "This strangeness, this real other-worldliness of the fairyland of Yeat's poetry, derives partly, no doubt, it would appear, from the fascinating anthology of Irish fairy-tales which Yeats compiled and edited, from Irish folk-lore itself." But this peculiar fascination mainly arises from the fact that Yeats has made his fairy-

world a symbol of the imaginative world of rest and peace and recuperation. It is a delightful, delicious little world, an Arcadia, a land of romance, where a life of reverie, of imagination and solitude is possible. *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, *The Man who Dreamed of Fairyland*, *The Stolen Child*, etc., are the finest of these escape poems. While this early poetry provides escape from the sordid realities of life. "It also brings us into contact with a generally living folkculture and a mythology which has not grown stale and hackneyed by centuries of repetition."

**The Fairy-world—Its Atmosphere**

Yeats' early poetry provides us with a dream-world into which we escape for the time being from the ugliness and vulgarity of an industrial civilisation into the mists of an imaginary celtic twilight. It is a world of vague and dim landscapes with uncertain half-lights and blurred outlines, a world in which everyday "a Druid twilight sheds." It is a fantastic, unreal world in which there are "shower of moons" which awaken "leafy tunes;" the woods are plashy, the seas, "star-laden", the boughs, "have their fruits and blossoms at all times of the year" and where, "rivers run over with red beer and brown beer." Again and again the heroes of the young poet are lured away by fairies to this wonder-land where they dance with them and live them.

**Early Style**

The style of this early poetry is easy and languid, weighted with clotty metaphors and epithets and showing the influence of Spenser, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites. It is highly coloured, but the colours are pale, shadowy and misty, in keeping with the vague, wistful, nostalgic tone. There is ample of Pre-Raphaelite decoration, there is profuse use of Imagery and word-pictures, but these are merely decorative without any ulterior or symbolic significance. "*His early poetry is over-hung with Pre-Raphaelite tapestro.*" Even when used, Yeats' symbolism is largely traditional, and lacks the

complexity and richness of his later mode. The mode of treatment is simple, elementary and direct. "A mysterious atmospheric quality is evoked by an effective arrangement of dainty footed words, speaking in a sweet, mellifluous, feminine voice", and many of the early poems including *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* owe their exquisiteness to this fact. In the first poem of *The Crossways,* we are told "words alone are certain good", and during this period the poet is frequently swept off his feet by the lure of words.

**Early Realism—The Connecting Link**

However, even this early dream-poetry has within it the germs of the later. Innisfree is not merely a dream-country, it is also an actual Island opposite Sligo which was familiar to Yeats since early boyhood. His treatment of Irish history, legend and folk-lore has also a patriotic purpose, that of reviving the ancient culture, history and tales of heroism of Ireland. Real Irish rivers, mountains, and valleys, as Knoknemara, Durmahair, Lisadill, appear again and again, and bring this escape poetry into contact with reality. Many of the escape poems thus become patriotic, national poems. Besides this, the very urge to escape into a world of peace and shelter shows an awareness of the "inadequacies of reality, its conflicts and mechinations." The fascination of fairyland is presented as something inimical to life in the real world. Indeed, by the time of *the Man Who Dreamed of Fairyland*, the poet makes it clear that one who lives with the fairies loses sense of the laws of the ordinary human world and the consequences are terrible. The man is "no more wise" after his singing with the fairies. One must not escape from the responsibilities of life in this way, rather he must shoulder them with courage and determination.

**The Fusion of Opposites as a Link**

Thus the core of reality in the early poetry foreshadows the realism of the poetry to come. The two are

inter-related in another way also. The key-note of Yeats' poetry is the bringing together or confrontation of opposites. We have already noticed above the conflict between imagination and reality. In his early poetry, Yeats transfers ancients myths and legends into a modern context. He creates new myths out of old, or endows the old ones with a new significance. Thus while the old Irish legends clustering round Oisin, Fergus, King Goll and Cuchulain, retain their individual characters, they also mirror the poet's personality. Thus there is a mingling of the past and the present, the personal and the impersonal, the racial and the individual. This is what Yeats also does in his later poetry. But in the early poetry the method is elementary and simple. The legends are first merely narrated, and the narration is direct in the ballad tradition, and then they are linked up with the poet's personality. In the later poetry, the legends are not directly narrated ; the old images are transferred from their original context, and are linked up with the poet's own experience, and in this way, in their new setting, they acquire a rich symbolic significance.

**The Phase of Introspection—Aestheticism**

"*Yeats began as a late Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite with the additional advantage of contact with the Irish mythological tradition and folk-culture*" (*Pinto*). But he did not remain a poet of the celtic twilight for ever, he soon grew out of the fairy-haunted dream-world of his youth. Before the final transition to life and reality took place, there followed a brief phase in which Yeats made his voyage within, withdrawing as much as possible from the contemporary world and enriching his inner life by concentrating on purely visionary themes. In the nineties, he came under the influence of the French Symbolists and the English Aesthetes—Mellarme, Arthur Symons, Pater etc.—and accepted whole heartedly their conception of pure poetry and adoration of beauty. *Mellarme* and the other symbolists taught him that absolute beauty could be created only through the use of symbols. Yeats now believes in the theory of "art for art's sake" and attempts

to write pure poetry, a poetry of pure suggestion, a poetry from which all prosaic elements are banished *Dr. C. M. Bowra* in his *Heritage of Symbolism* rightly points out, "all preliminaries, explanations, are omitted and the gain in concentrations is enormous." The poetry is fully packed. "*It has some of the direct appeal of music.*" Under the influence of Mellarme, Yeats advocates at this stage "a casting out of descriptions of nature for the sake of nature, of the moral law for the sake of the moral law" and a return to the old way of our fathers. The rhythm of his poetry is no longer the energetic rhythm, as of a man running, of his early poetry, but a, "*wavering, meditative, organic rhythm*" which is the embodiment of imagination "*that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time.*" His poetry is now to be composed in words as subtle and complex and mysterious as the body of a flower or of a woman. Yeats still uses Irish myths, but now he uses them to express his own states of mind. Thus in *the Song of the Wandering Aengus*, the search of the Irish hero for his beautiful beloved symbolises the poet's own search for an ideal, unattainable Beauty. *The Shadowy Waters*, a poetic drama, may be said to be Yeats' most ambitious work in the aesthetic-symbolic tradition of the nineteen-nineties. Symbolism, highly individual and complex, persists through all Yeats' poetry, but with the *In the Seven Woods* (1904) a turning point is reached in Yeats' career and he strikes a new note of sharp satire and realism. He has made his voyage within, discovered the beauty of the Inner life, but also realised that it is a terrible inhuman beauty, "The world's bane."

**Return to Reality—Causes**

Various causes in the opening years of the century combine to draw Yeats out of his ivory tower and make him a great poet. His frustration in love, his bitter experiences in politics and in the Abbey Theatre, his involvement in public controversies, all combine to shatter his illusions and produce the harsh, sardonic tone of the poems of this realistic, transitional phase. His dreams are gone, and he has come closer to life and reality, and is conscious

of blood and mire and degradation. The change began with *In the Seven Woods* (1904), and the scope of his subject matter is gradually widened till *The Responsibilities* (1914), "to include ironic commentary on contemporary affairs." "Now instead of the remote mythology of Gaelic legend, he creates a new mythology out of the patriots of 18th century Ireland who still lived in the popular imagination" (*Pinto*). He has come out of an esoteric aestheticism with his powers enriched, and capable of transforming contemporary actualities into the material of high poetry. The splendid Elegy on O' Leary,

*Romantic Ireland is dead and gone,*
*It is with O' Leary in the grave.*

is one of the finest examples of his new power of including in poetic experience material from contemporary life. His "dreamburdened" will now gradually give place to an inexorable facing of the grim realities of everyday life.

**Transition—Change in Style and Technique**

The change in subject matter ushers in a corresponding change in style and technique. The disillusionment and bitterness of the rapidly maturing poet is reflected in the sinewy bareness and austerity of his diction. Gone are the days of Pre-Raphaelite colouring, decorative images, clotty metaphors and languid rhythms. His images grow more definite and precise, colouring more brilliant, and there is an increasing tendency to use the common idiom, the colloquial diction, and the speech rhythms often choppy and harsh. As *Edmund Wilson* puts it, "now the soap-bubble colours vanish : the music of fairlyland dies away : we behold only, earthly and clear, the bare outlines of cold Clare Rock and Galway Rock and thorn," and his verse grows severe, definite and hasrh, but at the same time gains in vigour and intensity. Instead of romantic decoration, mythology, and incantatory music of the earlier verse, we get a terse, unadorned language and rhythms of almost Wordsworthian simplicity. His visions now acquire a new austerity, and his expression an almost Dantesque inten-

sity, sublimity, exaltation and epigrammatic concentration. The fine poem *A Coat* is a manifesto of the new art which will no longer evade actualities :

*I made my song a coat*
*Covered with embroideries*
*Out of oldm ythologies*
*From heel to throat :*
*But the fools caught it,*
*Wore it in the world's eyes,*
*As though they'd wrought it.*
*Song, let them take it,*
*For there's more enterprise*
*In walking naked.*

**The Later Poetry—Increase in Realism**

Yeat's powers continued to grow and mature, and his best, richest and most complex poetry was produced when he was over fifty years of age. He comes closer still to life and actuality, and his poetry shows an intense awareness of external reality. The Eastern Rebellion, the Civil War, the turmoil in Ireland and Europe, contemporary personalities, heroes and martyrs, Pearse, Connolly, Macdonagh and Macbride, figure increasingly in his poetry instead of the earlier legendary figures. He thus succeeds in creating new poetical myths out of contemporary politics and events. His personality has acquired an unrivalled richness and power through a new, vital contact with humanity and the world of men. He is sane and clear-eyed and it is this sanity which gives such tremendous power to the poetry of this period.

**Complexity of Moods**

His attitude to life is complex. He is disillusioned and bitter and wants to escape from the blood and mire and the inevitable degradation of the body and seeks a safe anchorage in the Tower or in Byzentium. But his lust for life is equally intense, and he is content to live his life

over again, even if it be, "to pitch into the frog spawn of a blindman's ditch." It is this complexity of moods and tones that produces the rich and magnificent poems of this period, poems reckoned among the greatest in the language.

**Maturity of Style and Technique**

There is a corresponding maturing of art and technique. The poet is at the height of his powers, has acquired full control over his material, moves with perfect ease from one dissimilar concept to another, and thus encloses "vast immensities" in little space as in the excellent piece *No Second Troy*. The structure is bony and bare but the image-pattern is complex and rich. Hence the astonishing richness and enduring quality of the poems of this period. The common idiom, the colloquial diction, the speech rhythms of the middle period are still used but in poems like *Sailing to Byzentium* an effect of "rare richness is produced by relating daily speech to an incantatory pattern. Gilttering, sonorous epithets are now used alternately with "Choppy words", conveying an impression of the stresses and accents of the present reality, as also of the mystery and richness of the past. At every stage of his development, Yeats made profuse use of symbols. In his early poems, he uses vague and beautiful images of flowers, stars, birds and mythical figures as an escape from the ugliness of his age. In the middle period, his symbolism is more complex and contemporary personalities are used as symbols of his revolutionary idealism. Now he creates highly complex and in tricate symbols, like the tower and the winding stair symbols, which are both personal and new as well as traditional and evocative. He uses drunkards and lechers—Crazy Jane and Tom, the lunatic—as realistic symbols to express his defiant contempt of ugliness and vulgarity which he called "whiggery".

As we noted earlier, one of the significant features of Yeats' poetry is the confrontation or bringing together of opposites. In the poetry of this complex period rich and intricate patterns are presented by bringing together new

modes of feeling and expression, new ways of emotion and thought, and the inexorable linking together of the past and the present, and the personal and the impersonal. *David Daiches* pertinently remarks, "While in his earlier poetry Yeats merely presented the antimonies of life, in his later life he tries also to reconcile them." However, *Middleton Murry, L.C. Knights*, and others do not agree with him and point out that his failure to reconcile these contradictions and thus to achieve an integrated vision, is the root cause of the increasing pessimism of his later poetry.

**The Last Phase—Note of Disillusionment**

The poetry of *the Last Phase* covers the poems written within a few years of the poet's death. The impression created is not one of fulfilment and harmony. The tone is intensely tragic, and the ironic, defiant gaiety is only a mask to cover disappointments and frustrations. Yeats is humorous, even boisteriously humorous : he is defiantly ironical. But all this irony all this gaiety, all this banter is merely a sign of the intensity of his suffering. However, we cannot agree with those who say that the last phase shows a decline in the powers of the ageing poet. Quite to the contrary, he still has his "eagle mind," his "frenzy" : he has full command over his material and can write with perfect ease. There are no signs of any strain or labour or weakening of effect. The greatness of Yeats lies in the fact that he is in the fullness of his powers upto the very last. But the artist has achieved neither the integration and coherence for the 'phantasmagoria' that passed within his own brain (*Middleton Murry*) nor an integration of his own life with the life of the humanity at large. With time, the artist has grown more and more distinct, more and more a being in his own right, and has more and more lost grasp over the complex world. He is pathetically conscious of his own isolation when he writes :

*But I grow old among dreams,*
*A weathre-worn, marble Triton,*
*Among the streams.*

It is the unconsciousness of this failure to achieve the larger "unity of life," that imparts a peculiar pathos to the epithaph with which his last volume of verses ends :

*Cast a cold eye*
*On life, on death*
*Horseman, pass by*

# 10

## *Yeats' Early Poetry : Characteristic Features*

1. *The Juvenilia, 1885,* Immature, boyish poems and poetic plays.

2. *The Crossway, 1889,* including poems first published as "The Wandering of Oisin and other Poems".

3. *The Rose, 1893,* including poems first published as "The Countess Cathleen and other Poems."

4. *The Wind among the Reeds, 1899,* Yeats' aestheticism—The English Decadents.

**The Juvenilia—Signs of Promise**

Yeats commenced writing poetry quite early in his life while still a student at the Dublin Art School. His father exalted dramatic poetry above evey other kind, and so the young poet started, as he himself fells us, turning out romantic poetic plays after plays with incoherent fantastic plots, in the imitation of Shelley and Spenser. *The Island of Statues*, *Mosada*, *The Seeker*, etc., are all Arcadian pastorals with enchanted islands, mysterious flowers, timid shepherds, and majestic ice-eyed queens. These early pieces together with three poems on Indian themes—*The Indian Upon Himself*, *Kanva*, and *Anashuya and Vijaya*—form Yeats' Juvenilia. They were published as school boy exercises in *the Dublin University Review* and most of them have not been published subsequently in any of the collected editions of his works. They represent the shy and

arrested expression of his gentle and youthful fancies. The only good that can be said of them is that they show some signs of promise.

### "The Crossways"—The First Success

Yeats made his mark as a poet with the publication of his next collection of verses entitled *the Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems*. The principle work is a long narrative poems in three parts dealing with the life of the Celtic, legendary hero Oisin who was enticed away by the fairy, Fianna, to fairyland, and thus insulated from mortality. The verses in this volume were later revised and published in the Collected Edition as *the Crossways*. The collection consists of short dramatic sketches, meditative and fanciful lyrics, ballads, songs and quatrains. *The Song of the Happy Shepherd*, *The Stolen Child*, *Down by the Salley Gardens*, and *The Balla i of Moll Magee* are some of the finest pieces in this collection. Immature though the work is, latent in it are trains of thought and themes which will keep on recurring with widening significance up to the end of the poet's life.

### "The Rose"—Popularity

Yeats' next volume of verses entitled *the Countess Cathleen and Other Poems* (1893) has now been re-arranged and entitled *I he Rose* in *The Collected Poems*. The collection includes some of the most widely loved and most commonly anthologized of his poems. It includes the exquisite lyric *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* which cast its spell on *R. L. Stevenson* who wrote of it, "It is so quaint and airy, simple, artful and eloquent to the heart." Commenting on the beauty and fascination of these early lyrics. *A. G Stock* writes, "If he had died then it would have been easy to believe of Yeats what some have thought of Keats, that he had exhausted his genius." *The Rose* is the central symbol, and the poems are organised round it.

### "The Wind among the Reeds"—Yeats' Aestheticism

Yeats' next volume entitled *the Wind among the Reads* appeared in 1899. Yeats had been taking keen interest in

magic, astrology, occultism, theosophy, crystal-gazing, etc., and the volume shows the impact of his new interests. Into the dream world of Irish country-side and folk-lore, he brings in his new loves and the result is, "a work with a haunting cadence and an intangible evanescent charm." The poet had also come under the spell of the French Symbolists and the English Aesthetes of the nineties and the verses in this collection reflect his farthest withdrawal from life and reality. They represent a phase of introspective aestheticism, and mark the consummation of Yeats' early style. The wind here is the central symbol, a symbol of vague desires and aspirations. The volume contains some of Yeats greatest poetry : it is not recognised as his greatest only because it has been overshadowed by his later work.

**Early Poetry—Its Characteristic Features**

Such in brief is the early poetry of Yeats. It has certain well-marked features of its own which both distinguish it from, and link it up with, his later poetry. We shall now examine these special features first with reference to content and then with reference to style and technique.

**Its Romantic Escapism—Phase of English Influence**

Yeats' early poetry is frankly an escape poetry. It takes us into a world of phantasy, a dream-world, a world of Irish countryside, folk-lore, peasant beliefs, and traditions. The poet escapes from the world of reality into an ideal fairy-world of Irish mythology. In the beginning, his dream-world is merely a beautiful ideal region in the thinned out English romantic tradition. The influences on him are English, Arcadian, Spenserian and Shelleyian, and even in his treatment of the Irish themes he displays, "the normal English romantic attitude towards things celtic" (*David Daiches*). There is a wistful longing for a utopia, for a perfect world where the poet may get some rest and quiet from the fever and fret of the real.

**The Phase of Irish Influence**

But gradually his subject matter becomes more and

more Irish and he is able to capture the celtic spirit is distinguished by the intensity of its living faith in what is irrational and other worldly, and it is this very living faith that Yeats now brings to his ideal fairy-world. He is serious about the fairies, has talked about them with Irish peasants for whom they were a concrete experience, and is convinced that they are not mere make-believe, "but a physical reality, and certainly a logical link in the chain of being" (*Stock*). The heroes of his early lyrics again and again escape to fairyland where they find eternal love-making and sweet delights : they dance on twilit lawns to strange music. The refrain to *the Stolen Child* admirably evokes the peculiar charm and unearthly atmosphere of Yeats' fairy-world :

> *Come away, O human child* !
> *To the water and the wild*
> *With a fairy, hand in hand,*
> *For the world's more full of weeping than you understand.*

**Its Concreteness—Use of Irish Topography**

As *Stock* puts it, Yeats has succeeded in capturing the very spirit of a folk-song, "the spirit which makes it wander round the world without any questioning." Yeats' fairyland is a compensation for the grayness of harsh reality : it is a symbol for the perfect world of imagination, infinitely seductive and delicious. However, solidity and concreteness is introduced into this wonder-world by the use of the actual Irish topography. Thus the man who dreamed of fairyland stands at Dromahair, wanders by the sands of Lissadell, and muses by Scanavin. Yeats' Innisfree is both a romantic utopia and a real island near Sligo.

**Its Vague, Haunted Atmosphere**

The world of this romantic wonderland is a misty world of vague, uncertain lights, and dim twilights. The landscape is bare of human habitation : there are woods and pools and lovely hills but neither cities nor cultivated

fields. "His world is seen", remarks *Stock*, "not in full sunlight or the clear neutrality of a grey day, but in starlight and twilight, and the unearthly cold light of dawn, and under visionary fires." The human figures are few and belong to ancient times, or to all times. There is a hermit or two, an old priest, and an occasional cottage-dweller in the background. There are Druids and heroes out of old legends, and vaguely medieval queens. But it is thickly populated by supernatural beings, faeries, angelic presences, "wayward twilight companies," and "flaming multitudes" with, "Their long wings, the flesh of their white feet." In *To Ireland in Coming Times*, we are told that, "numerous wizard things" go about his table to and fro. It is a wiery haunted world in which the natural and supernatural are inextricably blended.

### The Under-current of Realism

This early utopian poetry has a dual aspect. It conveys the poet's intense, nostalgic yearning for an idyllic state of being, it also expresses his equally intense sense that one cannot escape reality in this way. The *Sidhies, the Danaan children, the Druids,* the fairies, have nothing sinister about them, but the mortal, who lives with them, is cut off from the stream of mortal, life and the consequences of such an escape from the responsibilities of life may be terrible. The man who dreamed of fairyland realises that such a life is the world's bane and one, who lives it, finds no rest even in the grave. This very lesson is conveyed with greater force and clarity in *the Happy Townland. Stock* rightly emphasises that the prevailing mood of these escape-poems is one of irresponsible delight, "but there is a faint under-tone of foreboding : as if a child gives his hand to the elemental spirits, innocently in love with their wildness, and another presence is silently aware that their gift to their devotees is an agony of loneliness."

### The Note of Disillusionment

Indeed, even at this early, romantic stage of his career,

Yeats has an overwhelming sense of the ugliness of actuality and there are a number of exquisite lyrics which express this sense of the inadequacy of life. His discontent with life arises from three causes (1) his monkish hatred for science and the increasing ugliness and barrenness of an industrial civilisation. (2) his consciousness of the conflict and tensions of human life, and (3) the awareness of the passing away of Youth and Beauty as a result of the ravages of time. His hatred for the ugliness of a materialistic age is poignantly and pithily expressed in *the Song of the Happy Shepherd* :

*The woods of Arcady are dead*
*And over is their antique joy.*

In *The Two Trees*, the demons hold a glass which, "reflects broken boughs and blackened leaves," and in which, "all things turn to barrenness." "The ravens of unresting thought" come to the poet, and he advises.

*Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,*
*The holy tree is growing there.*

In the *Lover Tells of the Rose in His Heart*, all things ugly and broken wrong the image of the beloved, the ideal of her he has in his heart :

*All things uncomely and broken, all things worn out and old*
*The cry of a child by the roadway, the creak of a lumbering cart*
*Are wronging your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart.*

His acute, heart felt agony at the ravages of Time on Youth and Beauty has been fittingly expressed in *The Ephemera* and *the Falling of Leaves*. Yellow leaves fall round the lovers, and their love is wanning. It is this agony which gives to his early love-lyrics, like *When You*

*Are Old*, a rare intensity of feeling, and a sense of passive suffering.

### Note of Patriotism—Use of Irish Legends

The poet makes increasing use of Irish myths and legends. He revives the old Gaelic heroic cycles as well as makes new myths out of the old ones and in this way seeks to bring about both a political and a literary renaissance. Poetry thus fuses with patriotism, and he may fittingly be called the first national poet of young Ireland. In one of his finest political lyrics, he tells us of his ambition :

*Know, that I would accounted be*
*True brother of a company*
*That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong.*

and further that,

*Nor may I less be counted one*
*With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson,*
*Because, to him who ponders well,*
*My rhymes more than their rhyming tell.*

and in *To the Rose upon the Rood of Time*, he expresses his determination to, "sing of old Eire and the ancient ways." He now sings in his poetry of ancient Gaelic heroes, like King Goll, Fergus Aengus, Cuchulain, Queen Maeve, Oisin, etc. The heroic life and death of the passionate Cuchulain, "the Irish Achilles," as *Mr. Alfred Nutt* calls him, fascinated him and Cuchulain becomes a recurrent symbol in his poetry. A number of poems including *The Death of Cuchulain* are devoted to him.

### Yeats' Ballads—Their Chief Features

The heroic life and adventures of these ancient, legendary figures form the subject of Yeats' early ballads. Earlier he had advised the young poets of Ireland to choose subjects from their own native land where, "there is no river or mountain that is not associated in the memory with some legend or events," and in the ballads he

deals with such local traditions as well as with legends which have a more national character. The *Madness of King Goll* tells of the wandering of Goll, the mad Fenian King, in quest of unattainable beauty. *The Song of Wandering Aengus* has a similar theme : it, too, tells of the search of ideal Beauty on the part of Aengus, the Gaelic god of love and beauty. However, the best of Yeats' ballads on a heroic subject is *The Wadnering of Oisin* which narrates how Oisin was enticed away by Niamh to the land of eternal youth where he lived for full three hundred years. But the memory of his race and country disturbed him and he returned, only to fall down dead on the instant. *The Ballad of Father O' Heart*, *The Ballad of Moll Magee*, etc., on the other hand, have a local setting, and a more local appeal. They have the directness, simplicity, and naturalness of an actual folk song, and Yeats shows considerable skill in the handling of the traditional ballad metre :

*Come round to me, little childer*
*There, don't fling stones at me*
*Because I mutter as I go ;*
*But pity Moll Magee*

The naivete, the simplicity, the artlessness of these lines from *The Ballad of Moll Magee* need no comment.

The distinctive features of a traditional balled may be summed up as (*a*) directness and simplicity of treatment (*b*) absence of artifice and elaboration (*c*) complete objectively and no personal colouring (*d*) community appeal (*e*) tragic tone intensified by the hostility of nature, and (*f*) extreme simplicity of versification. His early ballads must be ranked very high for Yeats has succeeded in them in capturing the simplicity, directness and artlessness of the traditional ballad. They have a communal appeal, dealing, as they do, with local legends and with local tragedies. The world they re-create is real, sad, and fairy-haunted, the real world of the Irish countryside. The use of spoken speech and dialectic words, and speech

rhythm endows them with a peculiar charm of their own. They express Ireland in all her mystery, her greatness and her tragedy. They are full of the names of local hills and places, of local and legendary heroes. They are firmly rooted in the soil of Ireland and entitle Yeats' to be considered as a great national Irish poet.

**Influence of the English Decadents—Aestheticism**

While the ballads represent Yeats' phase of complete objectivity the poems of *The Wind Among the Reeds* represent his rejection of mere exteriority and the farthest limit of his withdrawal within himself. They represent a phase of Introspective aestheticism, a phase of, "art for art's sake," an adoration of beauty for its own sake, a rejection of life and its actuality. Yeats has fallen, though only for a while, under the spell of the French Symbolists like Mellarme, and the English Decadents of the nineties, with whom he came into intimate contact as a result of his membership of the Rhymers' Club, and the poetry of the period is a record of these influences. In the words of a writer, the poetry of *The Wind Among the Reeds* is a, "poetry of the twilight, solemn, ceremonious and remote, and yet at the same time intensely and evocatively personal, a poetry which represents the farthest advance of Yeats' movement in the direction of the dream." As *Bowra* points out his absorption in the symbolist movement was so great that we find him, "writing deliberately on a theory." "All preliminaries, explanations, comparisons are omitted and the gain in concentration is enormous." His poetry now is a poetry of suggestion from which all prosaic elements are banished. The peotry is fully packed, it has often the direct appeal of music. In his *Essay on Symbolism* we find Yeats advocating, "a casting out of the descriptions of nature for the sake of nature, of the moral law for the sake of moral law", etc. In other words, he supports whole heartedly *Mellarme's* conception of "*pure poetry*." He now casts out of his poetry, "those energetic rhythms as of men running," and seeks the use of, "those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms which are the embodiments of the imagi-

nation, that neither denies, nor hates, because it has done with time." He tries to use complex symbols and his poetry is to be composed of, "words as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious life, as the body of a flower or of a woman."

**The Decadent World-weariness—Rejection of Life**

Such doctrines have their full impact on his poetry. The common things of life are viewed with disfavour, and the predominent impulse is "to be done with time." Poem after poem expresses this feeling of world-weariness, the Decadent *ennui* and boredom. Sometimes "Time drops in decay," at other times, 'Time and the world are ever in flight," and at still other times the poet finds,

> *Time and the world are ebbing away*
> *In twilights of dew and fire.*

The poet is frustrated, full of wistful longing, and would like to remake the world "like a casket of gold." No happiness, no love, no beauty is possible in this world, and the frustration can end only with the end of Time :

> *They will find no other face fair*
> *Till all the valleys of the world have with red away*
> *Until the axle break.*

A feeling of weariness, boredom and languor runs persistently through the poems of the volume. It is there in *The Rose of Battle*,

> *Beauty grown sad with its eternity*
> *Made you and us, and of the dim Grey sea*

it is there in *He wishes for the Cloth of Heaven*,

> *The blue and the dim and the dark cloths*
> *of night and light and the half-light,*

and also in *He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead*,

> *O would, beloved, that you lay*
> *Under the dock-leaves in this ground,*
> *While lights were paling one by one,*

Colour-words have been used to create a suitable atmosphere. Previously, Yeats had used ancient Irish myths merely as stories, but now he uses them as symbols to express his personal states of mind. Thus in the *Song of Wandering Aengus*, he uses the old story as a symbol of the poet's search for ideal Beauty. In poems like *the Cap and Bells*, he uses symbols, "whcih have no precise or intelligible meaning, but which live by their own power and intensity," which convey pure sensation in the manner of the French symbolists.

**The Distinguishing Features**

It is for all these reasons that *Jeffares* regards *The Wind Among the Reeds* as Yeats', "final poetry for poetry's sake, for beauty's sake, and the swan song of his *fin-de siecle* composition." *I.A. Richards* finds in this poetry a total rejection of life itself. However, such statements must be accepted with caution. For one thing, Yeats' symbolism is, on the whole, more precise and definite than that of *Mellarme* and this precision and exactness results from his Irish interests. Moreover, his symbolism is modified and coloured by his interest in magic and occultism. The English Decadents have been called "spiritual foreigners" for their poetry is exotic and foreign, while that of Yeats is deeply rooted in his own country. He is the national poet of Ireland, deals with Irish themes—mythology and legend—and the hills and dales of Ireland are everywhere even in *the Wind Among the Reeds*. The poetry of the English aesthetes in urban in character while Yeats is the poet of the Irish countryside. There is, no doubt, much world-weariness and langour but it is Keatsian or Tennysonian rather than that of the poets of the Decadent school. There is no morbidity, and there are some poems of pure joy. It never

amounts to a death-wish or a total rejection of life itself. Rather he would like to re-make the world according to his dreams. In the well-known lyric, *The Lover Tells of the Rose in His Heart*, we are told,

*The wrong of unshapely things is a wrong too great to be told :*

*I hunger to build then anew and sit on a green knoll apart,*

*With the earth and the sky and the water, re-made, like a casket of gold.*

**The Rendering of Opposites**

And this brings us to a consideration of another important feature of Yeats' poetry—its presentation of antimonies or bringing together of opposites. The poet would like to re-make the world, but he would also like to sit "on a green knoll apart." This ambivalence or duality runs through all Yeats' poetry. *David Daiches* admirably stresses the point when he writes in his *Poetry at Present*, "Human activity as opposed to fairy activity, the natural as opposed to the artificial, the familiar as opposed to the remote and strange, the domestic as opposed to the heroic, the contemporary as opposed to the ancient, the transient as opposed to the permanent"—these contrasts provide all the themes in *The Crossways* and *The Rose*. The search for a pattern round which to organise his thoughts is the central fact of Yeats' life and poetry, and the presentation of such contrasts is a part of the general tendency to construct a pattern.

**Early Style—Pre-Raphaelite and Keatsian**

The above discussion clearly brings out even Yeats' yearly poetry displays a gradual evolution of his powers and a consistent advance towards greater individuality. A similar maturing of powers is also evidenced by the style and technique of the poetry of the period. In one of his

earliest lyrics, *The Song of the Happy Shepherd*, we are told,

*For words alone are certain good,*
*Sing, then, for this is also sooth.*

During this early period, "words alone are certain good" for the poet and the lure of words carries him off his feet. His poetry is heavily over-loaded with Pre-Raphaelite *decor.* "Yeats' earliest poetry is mainly pre-Raphaelite, in the Tennyson-Rosetti-Morris tradition." The tapesteries of his early work, "the pearl-pale hand," "dream-awakened eyes," "dew-dropping sky," "cloud-pale eye-lids", "dew-cold lilies," and the use of colour words, 'golden','silver,' 'blue' 'dim', 'grey', 'light''half-light,' etc., all remind us of Keats, Tennyson and Morris. However, the use of such mellifluous, dainty, soft-footed words helps the poet to create suitable atmospheric effects. It is in this way that his landscapes are bathed in cold, uncertain lights and half-lights, and an atmosphere to mystery, of phantasy, and of remoteness is evoked.

**Early Imagery and Word-pictures**

His imagery at this period is purely decorative, rather than functional, and his images come out in troops. His Keatsian word-pictures, as has been well said, have a processional quality. Here are a few examples selected at random : "*Old like the wandering moon*," "*like coloured Asian birds*," "*Laughter like murmy of the sea*", wool "*whiter than sea-froth*", the brows of a lady, "*white as fragrant milk*", etc. This is fine pageantry, this is exquisite tapestry, but it has no organic relation with the meaning of the poem concerned. Commenting on Yeat's imagery in his early poetry, *Stock* writes, "At this stage he is more concerned to communicate the images themselves than the thoughts behind them : but many poems repay close study, for, as one image evokes another, they light up other poems and the pattern of the mind grows clear."

**Ellmann's View—The Two Styles**

As Yeats' style matured and he acquired greater mastery over his craft, he shed more and more of this verbiage and superfluity. The whole trend of Yeats' development as an artist is towards greater simplicity and naturalness, precision and exactness in style and syntex. This is so much the case that *Ellmann* in his well-known work, *The Identity of Yeats* points out that even as early as the nineties Yeats had not "one" but "two" styles. This duality in his manner of expression, the learned critic points out, results from the ambivalence or duality within his own personality. However it may be, Yeats achieves directness and extreme simplicity, almost Wordsworthian, in his ballads like *the Ballad of Moll Magee*, and *The Song of the old Mother*. Definiteness and precision, clearness and intensity, are here achieved by the elimination of poetic verbiage and the use of colloquialism. Words from everyday rustic speech are effectively used and the prose order, more specially in *The Song of the old Mother*, is maintained throughout. Yeats' technical accomplishment is further seen in the fact that visual clarity and concreteness is achieved by the use of imagery drawn from common everyday objects and phenomena. There is greater terseness and concentration.

**Music and Versification**

It has been said that Yeats had no ear for music, but his poetry belies such statements. He might not have been able to sing, but he certainly had an ear for the cadence of music. "At this early stage, his rhythms are formal, not mechanical, they hesitate often, like a mind feeling its way to exactitude rather than asserting a dogma, but they never lose their music" (*Stock*). There are no false notes, no cluttering with thick consonants where the movement should be smooth and easy. The poet is at ease with a slow, chanting, heroic measure, full of long monosyllables that ring like a ceremonial invocation as in the following :

*Turn if you may from battles never done,*
*I call, as they go by me one by one,*

*Danger no refuge holds, and war no peace,*
*For him who hears love sing and never cease.*

Sometimes he is solemn, and at other times he breaks into a swift, lighted-heated dance as in the exquisite *The Fiddler of Dooney*. By the time of *the Wind among the Reeds*, we find him experimenting with a long, flexible line, with room in it for hesitations and changes of mood. Sometimes, the verse has a stumbling movement with stresses and pauses almost prosaic, as in the following :

*A man with a hazel wand came without sound*
*He changed me suddenly ; I was looking another way*
*And now my calling is but the calling of a hound*

At other times, the movement is that of solemn incantation :

*Being weary of the world's emoires, bow down to you,*
*Master of the still stars and of the flaming door.*

A poet's characteristic rhythms are an expression of his frame of mind at the time of writing, and, "Yeats' rhythms at this stage of his work are half-entranced, like a man walking alone lost in a train of visionary thought, or incantatory as if he thought of poetry as a priestly vocation" (*Stock*).

# 11

## *The Transition : The Realistic Middle Phase*

1. *Adam's Curse, 1902*, published in "the Monthly Review."
2. *The Folly of being Comforted, 1903.*
3. *In the Seven Woods, 1904.*
4. *The Green Halmet and other Poems, 1910.*
5. *Responsibilities, 1914.*

**Transition to the New Style**

*The Wind Among the Reeds* marks the culmination of Yeats' early style. The collection represents the farthest limit of his withdrawal into a world of dreams, but he soon realised the barrenness of such a withdrawal, and the realisation prepared his mind for that new alignment of forces that was to make possible the poetry of the whole man. With the turn of the century a new wind begins to blow, and the next fourteen years see a gradual transition from Yeats' early manner to the manner of his later poetry, and *In the Seven Woods*—a thin volume of fourteen poems—the poet brings a less "dreamburdened's will to his work."

**Causes of the Change**

Various factors combined to draw Yeats out of his ivory tower. His frustration in love—Maud Gonne married

Major Macbride in 1903—fundamentally reshaped his attitude towards poetry. Bitterness of frustrated love, his dissatisfaction with the Irish people who had hissed Synge's play *The Playboy of the Western World*, the disillusionment caused by the pettiness and meanness of real life which he experienced during his involvement in public controversies, like the Lane-Controversy, his connection with the Abbey Theatre, the selfishness and hypocrisy of Irish politicians, his contact with Synge who advised him, "before verse can be human again, it must learn to be brutal", all helped to bring Yeats down to earth. The poetry of the period shows a keen sense of life and reality and is full of disillusionment, impatience and indignation.

**Change in Poetic Ideals**

His ideals of art, too, underwent a sea-change. Earlier, he had advocated that the art should liberate themselves "from their age and from life," and busy themselves with, "old faiths, myths, dreams", etc. But now he believes, "we should ascend out of common interests, the thought of the newspaper, of the market-place of men of science, but only so far as we can carry the normal, passionate, reasoning self, the personality as a whole." In other words, poetry must deal with the whole man—there should be no withdrawal from real life but an acceptance of it and presentation of it. His poetry, therefore equites a new character : his themes become realistic, everything personal and impersonal is included, and treated realistically. The imagination must be rescued from abstractions and in order to bring it closer to reality he presses into his poetry the theatre, patriotism, and the public controversies and prominent personalities of the day, as well as his own frustrations and disillusionments. As he tells us in *The Coat*, his early poetry was made of old mythologies and was covered with embroideries, but now he realises that there is more enterprise in "walking naked." The poem lends colour to *C. M. Bowra's* contention that he turned away with horror from Celtic imagery, folk-lore, mythology and legend, because his manner had been borrowed and debased by a host of imitators. That he was dissatis-

fied with his earlier manner is also borne out by a letter to Katharine Tynan in which he refers to his earlier poetry as confused, incoherent, and inarticulate. He now deliberately re-shapes his style and makes it more definite and precise. In *The Coming of Wisdom with Time*, he tells us,

*Through all the lying days of my youth,*
*I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun.*
*Now I may wither into the truth.*

In other words, he now bids good-bye to his earlier pre-Raphaelitism, to his ealier "self-introspection," which he now calls "womanish", and deals with contemporary problems and conflicts and faces truth and reality with courage.

**Externality—Presentation of Contemporary Irish Scene**

The change which comes over Yeats' subject-matter at this stage may be described in one-word as "externality". He is more and more involved in the confusion of the contemporary Irish scene, and feels an urge to express his own re-action to it. His themes, both personal and contemporary, become more realistic. He no longer lives in Ireland's heroic past, but takes note of contemporary life and events. Thus in the very opening poem of *The Seven Woods*, he refers to the coronation of Edward VII,

*I have forgot awhile*
*Tara uprooted, and new commonness*
*Upon the throne and crying about the streets*
*And hanging its paper flowers from post to post,*
*Because it is alone of all things happy*

In *The Adam's Curse*, he deals realistically with a personal experience, and incidentally tells us of his poetic methods. His subject matter has widened, and it has begun to include themes, picked up from the activities of his prose self. As *Stock* puts it, "The descent into an

actual time and place is a new departure in his poetry: and in this book of fourteen poems (*The Seven Woods*) there is a good deal that is new." Not that the old themes have been abandoned, but the newer ones keep intruding. He can still write of *Red Hanahan's Song about Ireland* in his earlier manner, but something has gone wrong, as he tells us,

*I have no happiness in dreaming of Brycelinde*

In *the Happy Townland*, there are still queens, "Their eyes blue like the ice", but the townland is no longer a utopia of rest and quiet, but "the world's bane." Title after title in the new collection indicates his direct interest in real life. *The Players Ask for a Blessing, Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation, The Abbey Theatre, A Drinking Song, To the Wealthy Man Who Promised a Second Subscription, Agitation Against Immoral Literature etc.*, all suggest contemporary setting, and contemporary events.

**The Note of Bitterness—Disillusionment**

The tone of the new poetry throughout is one of bitterness, disillusionment and frustration. The bitterness arises partly from defeat in love and partly from the frustration "which attended so much of his activity in Irish literary politics". He had his dream of Ireland, but now he found that she did not to his mental pattern and he could not mould her as he wished. "He was also irritated by the pettiness and meanness of the ordinary citizen with whom his work in Ireland brought him into constant contact. Now there is a bitterness in his poetry that is far removed from the plaintive melancholy of his earlier work" (*David Daiches*), 'Romantic Ireland' of his earlier poetry now becomes a "blind, bitter," and a, "fool driven land". The levelling rancorous mind is at its work :

*The weak lay hands on what the strong has done,*
*Till that be tumbled that was lifted high,*
*And discord follow upon unison,*
*And all things at one common level lie.*

In *The Adam's Curse* we are told that the common people are a "noisy set" who cannot appreciate the pains and labour involved in artistic creation. His indignation expresses itself in a tone of raillery in the following :

*............My curse on plays*
*That have to be set up in fifty ways,*
*On the day's war with every knave and dolt,*
*Theatre, business, management of men.*

Here is almost a sardonic cry at the difficulties which the poet faces and has to over-come :

*The fascination of what is difficult*
*Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent,*
*Spontaneous joy and natural content*
*Out of my heart.*

**Love Poetry—Complexity of Moods**

This very vein of bitterness and disillusionment marks the love-poetry of the period. The tone is more realistic and factual and the poets' mood more complex. He had been in love with Maud Gonne for quite a long time, and had sung of her earlier as well, as in *The Rose of the World,* but now for the first time we get an individualised portrait of the lady, a portrait remarkable for its realism and effectiveness :

*Tall and noble, but with face and bosom*
*Delicate in colour as apple blossom.*

Maud Gonne lives in the poems of Yeats, and her figure stands out with a firm, clear outline. The actual moments, the actual experience, and the actual words, get into his love-poems :

*One that is ever kind said yesterday,*
*"Your well-beloved's hair has threads of grey.*

The most elaborate love-poem in the new style is *Adam's Curse*. Its impatience and indignation is very much in the later Yeatsian manner :

> *Better go down upon your marrow-bones*
> *And scurb a kitchen pavement, or break stones.*

The poem reveals the poet's realisation that his love was irrevocable, its object unattainable, his youth gone. The advice in the following results from the bitterness of personal experience :

> *Never give all thy heart, for love*
> *Will hardly seem worth thinking of*
> *To passionate women, if it seem*
> *certain.*

And,

> *Sweet heart, do not love too long ;*
> *I loved long and long,*
> *And grew to be out of fashion*
> *like an old song.*

The mood is one of bitterness in,

> *Pardon that for a barren passion's sake,*
> *Although I have come close on forty-nine,*
> *I have no child, I have nothing but a book,*
> *Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.*

but one of reconciliation in,

> *Why should I blame her that she filled my days*
> *With misery*

**The Aristocratic Bias**

*The Green Halmet and other Poems*, "Marks the completion of Yeats' first metamorphosis" (*Daiches*). He comes

nearer still to life and reality. He drops his aloofness entirely, "and becomes a man of the world, a satirist and a thinker with clear-cut, unpopular views (*Stock*). In two poems, *The Maske* and *Brown Penny*, he celebrates the discovery of casual love, a discovery which gathered significance in the poetry of his old age. In two others, he is absorbed in theatre business, sardonically observing his own and other man's follies. His contempt for modern democratic public breaks out again and again. To his dissatisfaction with the Irish people is now added admiration and respect for Lady Gregory, and he develops his views on aristocracy. The aristocracy symbolises for him not only dignity, not only old values which were so noble, but, "system, order and tradition." Several poems celebrate the proud virtues of aristocracy. The poem *Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation* is an attack upon mounting spirit of social equality :

*How should the world be luckier if this house,*
*Where passion and precision have been one,*
*Time out of mind, become too ruinous,*
*To breed the lidless eye that loves the sun.*

*The Green Halmet*, says *Stock*, "is pervaded with a haughty contempt for democracy, a feeling for traditional heroic and aristocratic virtues, more positive than anything in the dreamy aloofness of the earlier books." Even the love poems are full of this spirit. Maud Gonne, who would, "have taught ignorant man most violent ways," is pardoned because she is so different from the rabble being so, "high and solitary and most stern."

**Celebration of Aristocratic Virtues**

*Responsibilities* further develops the themes and techniques of *the Green Halmet*. "There is a new courage of his convictions, a new consciousness of friends and enemies, a new respect for the fighting will and its weapon, the analytic intellect." Nearly all the poems are full of strength which comes out of a complete confidence in oneself, a confidence which borders on arrogance. The aristo-

cracy is praised again and again as the necessary guardian of art, on whom civilisation itself depends. Throughout his middle and later poetry, Yeats is an uncompromising champion of the big-house tradition, and countless poems are devoted to the celebration of aristocratic virtues both individual and typical. Thus the note struck in *September 13* is anti-bourgeouis : The Irish people,

*But fumble in a greasy till,*
*And add the half pence to the pence*
*And prayer to shivering prayer.*

The poem presents the opposition between the aristocratic and the commercial, the later representing a life of no tradition, and the former a properly patterned life.

**Increased Sense of Responsibility**

To motto to this collection of verses "In dreams begins responsibility" is the very embodiment of its spirit so much so that *untecker* classifies the poems on this basis. There are poems dealing with (*a*) supernatural responsibilities (*the Grey Rock*) (*b*) social responsibilities (*The "Lane poems*" and the poems dealing with "Play-boy riots)" (*c*) personal responsibilities (*Friends*, and poems to Maud Gonne) (*d*) aesthetic responsibilities (*A Coat*), and (*e*) responsibility to responsibilities (the beggar-group of poems).

**Increased Maturity : Interlinking of Opposites**

The poems of the transition period, more specially those included in *The Responsibilities*, show a maturing of Yeats' poetic power and an immense advance in technique. The poet has achieved mastery over his craft, and many of the poems in this collection give us a foretaste of the technique of his later poetry. For one thing, he is now able to transform prosaic contemporary themes into fit subjects for poetry. A contemporary event is first transformed into a personally felt emotion, and then is imparted an impersonal significance. He thus constantly moves from the topical to the general, from the personal to the

universal with perfect case and confidence. This aspect of his art is best illustrated by *Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation*. The house concerned is *Coole Park*, the residence of Lady Gregory, where Yeats had passed many a happy summer, and had found peace and shelter. The occasion for the poem was provided by a reduction of rent ordered by the court in the interest of the tenants. The poet was intensely moved, and felt that it was not a blow for Lady Gregory alone, but for the "big-house tradition", a tradition, which had been the guardian of past glory, art and culture. He then proceeds to speak of the blessings of big houses to human civilisation. In this way, the particular is invested with universal significance, and the past, present and future are inter-liked. This very inter-linking, this very transmutation of the personal and the particular into the general and the universal, is also seen in *No Second Troy*, one of the finest lyrics in the series. Maud Gonne is linked up with Helen and Deirder both in her beauty and her destructive power. The presentation of opposites is a marked feature even of Yeats' early poetry. But now he does not merely present the opposites, he also tries to re-concile them. Thus in *The Friend* there is an extraordinary blend of bitterness and forgiveness, and in *The Peacock* the discordant and the incompatible are reconciled in the fact that it is the hard, desolate rock that nourishes the beautiful peacock :

*The wind-beaten, stone-grey,*
*And desolate Three Rock*
*Would nourish his whim.*

This capacity to move with perfect ease from one opposite concept to another is a certain proof of growing imaginative powers. It reminds us of Donne at his best.

### Vast Concepts Enclosed within Short Space

The maturing of Yeats' powers is also seen in the fact that he is now able to enclose "Vast immensities" within the limited span of a short poem. This very vastness of scope is seen in *No Second Troy* referred to above, and the

vastness is achieved by inter-linking the destructive beauty of Maud Gonne first with Helen, whose beauty was responsible for the destruction of Troy, and then with equally destructive beauty of Deirder of the Irish Mythology. This terrible beauty is then seen as a part of the cyclic process of history :

*Why, what could she have done, being what she is ?*
*Was there another Troy for her to burn ?*

The occasion is particular, but vast suggestions are thrown out as Maud becomes a symbol not only of beauty and its destructive force but also of the cyclic movement of time. *The Cold Heaven*, generally regarded as the finest lyric in *the Responsibilities*, is a short piece of twelve lines only but the concepts which it encloses "transcend the accredited limits of a lyric." Many different emotions—desire, terror, desperation—all intensely felt, are expressed and closely interwoven. *Hone* praises it for its "controlled fury", and points out that it owes its power to its intensity and immediacy. The complex emotions of the poet are "not argued but presented." The poet realises with intense agony of spirit that his love has been futile. Despair fills his soul, he imagines himself a ghost, and is terrified at the thought of unjust punishment :

*Ah ! when the ghost begins to quicken,*
*Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent*
*Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken*
*By the injustice of the skies for punishment ?*

**Mythopoeic Gift**

Yeats was gifted with a rich mythopoeic imagination. He could use old myths, as he did in his early poetry, simply as stories for his narrative-verse ; now he modifies them to suit his purpose, or creates new myths out of old. In *No Second Troy*, he creates the new Maud Gonne myth and links it up with the Helen and Dierder myths. In *the*

*Magi* he transmutes the well-known Biblical myth into an entirely new one and invests it with a new significance. The Biblical wise men following a star themselves become stars gazing intently at the bestial floor. The expectation of an imminent miracle is thus suggested :

> *And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,*
> *Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,*
> *The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.*

Thus the approach of some terrible event is suggested. Some uncontrollable and, therefore, destructive, mysterious event, an event as epoch-making as the birth of Christ, but bestial in its nature, is imminent, and the Magi, turned stars, are watching expectantly for it. Thus the poet has created a new myth out of the old one, and invested it with a terrible significance.

**Use of Metaphysical Techniques**

The poem illustrates two other aspects of the poetic technique of Yeats' maturity. In the manner of the metaphysicals, he now brings together opposite images and links them up effectively. Thus the Magi come,

> *With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones*

the word 'ancient' suggests something soft and grey, while 'rain-beaten stones' gives the suggestion of hardness and firmness of outline. This very bringing together of opposites is also seen in the following from '*the Cold Heaven*' :

> *Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven*
> *That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice.*

*The Magi* also illustrates the poet's habit of concentrating the entire poem on a single image in the last line, which shines in its solitariness like a single star in the sky. Thus the entire poem is focussed on the epithet "bestial" in the last line with all its suggestive significance. This technique

has also been used effectively in *No Second Troy* where every line leads up to the image in the last, the core and centre of the entire poem :

> *Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam*
> *And Usna's children died.*

This concentration on a single key-image is more effective than elaborate description or a multiplicity of images.

To admirable poem *To a Shade* represents yet another aspect of the poet's technique. The thought moulds, "the stanza-pattern in the first verse, and the pattern sets the model for the succeeding stanzas : thus in the first stanza, pattern depends on thought, whereas in those that follow the thought is disciplined to fit the pattern that has been worked out in the initial verse" (*David Daiches*). The stately movement of the verse, the monumental phrasing, and the undulating movement of the poem, which comes to a climax at the end of each of the first two verses and then to its over-whelming final climax at the end of the third and last stanzas, show Yeats at his most impressive. The poem also displays "the metaphysical quality" of being able to take-up more than one attitude at a time. Thus in the third line of the first stanza the attitude is both elegiac and ironic :

> *If you have revisited the town, thin shade,*
> *Whether to look upon your monument*
> (*I wonder if the builder has been paid*).

**Use of Colloquial Diction and Rhythms**

In the poetry of the period under study, the poet leaves his ivory tower, comes down to earth and loads his verse with everyday events and facts. This coming down to earth is accompanied with an increasing use of the language of common man, of a colloquial diction, and of speech rhythm. The pre-Raphaelite *decor* and word-painting is denounced and given up. As *Edmund Wilson* puts it, "Now the soap bubble colours vanish, the music of

fairyland dies away, we behold only, earthly and clear, the bare outlines of, "cold Clare rock and Galway rock and horn." In middle life, he set himself to learn a new vocabulary and new techniques. He strips his language of all poeticism, uses prosaic words from everyday speech, and relies more and more on the stark essence of thought. His dictions grows colloquial, harsh, rugged and prosaic, as in *the Hour before Dawn* :

*A cursing rogue with a merry face,*
*A bundle of rags upon a crutch,*
*Stumbled upon that windy place.*

It has the run of everyday speech. The effect of harshness is created by the use of words like 'cursing', 'rogue', 'rags', 'crutch', etc., with recurring 'r' sounds. His words are prosaic, common place, and the syntax, too, is that of ordinary, everyday speech. The words may be plain and ordinary, but there is poignancy and intensity in them :

*A woman Homer sung*
*That life and letters seem*
*But an heroic dream.*

**Austerity—Absence of Ornament**

There is an immense advance in the precision of imagery and syntax. The poet practises absolute economy of means and his verse acquires a hard bony structure. In *the Mask* there is just the barest statement of theme without any ornament or superfluity that makes the poem so extra-ordinarily effective." Directness, economy, precision are the keynotes of Yeats' style at this stage, and as a result his verse acquires a masculine vigour and athletic sinewness. There is bareness and nakedness, but it is combined with intensity and poignancy of emotion and intricacy of design. As the poet tells us in *the Coat*, all mythological embroideries are thrown over-board and he likes to walk naked.

**Epigrammatic Terseness**

His style acquires an epigrammatic terseness and concentration which *Edmund Wilson* praises as almost Dantesque :

*To write for my own race*
*And for reality.*

or

*Through all the lying days of my youth*
*I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun :*
*Now I may wither into the truth.*

The poet is now able to sustain a grand manner through sheer intensity without rhetorical heightening. This precision and exactness is also seen in his imagery. His images are no longer, vague, misty, vapoury and hollow, but are remarkable for their clarity and definiteness of outline. Thus in *The Magi* and *The Cold Heaven* the imagery is solid and clear cut like "rain-beaten stones".

**Prose-rhythms**

The poet's rhythms, too, are no longer incantatory, but come closer to the rhythms of normal everyday speech. Thus in *the Adam's Curse* the lines run along like a prose conversation accidentally falling into rhyme and metre :

*Better go down upon your marrow-bones,*
*And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones,*
*Like on old pauper, in all kinds of weather.*

**Chief Features—Summing up**

The main features of the poet's middle style and versification may be summed up as :

1. Bareness and nakedness—absence of all superfluity and ornamentation—combined with intensity and intricacy.

2. Conversational and colloquial ease—use of prosaic words from everyday speech.

3. Masculine vigour instead of feminine sentimentality.

4. Precision and definiteness in style and imagery.

5. Epigrammatic terseness and concentration.

6. Speech rhythms instead of the incantatory rhythms of the earlier phrase.

# 12

## *The Later Poetry of Yeats : Maturity and Complexity*

1. *The Wild Swans at Coole, 1919*
2. *Michael Roberts and the Dancer, 1921*
3. *The Tower, 1928*
4. *The Winding Stair and other Poems 1933, including the poems grouped under "Words for Music Perhaps". "A Woman Young and Old".*

### Increased Mastery over Style and Technique

With *the Responsibilities* Yeats had completely freed himself from his earlier, immature style and manner, secured mastery over his craft and greater confidence in his powers, and fought his way into the 20th century. His later poetry shows but an increased mastery over the style and techniques of the middle period. It represents a perfection of the trends that were noted in the earlier chapter. There is greater intricacy and complexity of pattern combined with greater simplicity of style and manner. Yeats is one of the greatest of English poets by virtue of the poetry of this rich and complex period.

### No Repetition or Weakening of Powers

There were those like *C.L. Wrenn* and *Forrest Reid* who criticised *the Responsibilities* as merely topical verse and saw in it a marked, "fall off both in inspiration and

expression." They found in the volume a lack of spontaneity and lyrical impulse, and a general weakening and exhaustion of Yeats' poetic powers. However, a failing poet repeats his patterns, and there is no repetition in the next volume of verses that Yeats published. *The Wild Swans at Coole* is the best answer to such critics.

**"The Wild Swans at Coole"—Increased—Self-Control—No Bitterness**

*The Wild Swans at Coole* represents Yeats' return to a period of comparative calm. He had been conscious of his responsibilities to Ireland, and in the earlier volume had come out with an outspoken and forthright defence of Hugh Lane, Synge and Parnell. The selfishness and pettiness of the Irish people and politicians had enraged and embittered him, and there were frequent bursts of indignation. Synge had told him that poetry should be brutal before it could be humane, and in the poems in defence of Hugh Lane, he often grew brutal as in the poem, *To a Wealthy Man Who Promised a Second Subscription, etc.*, and even in *September 1913*. Such brutality was needed, for he was fighting a storm and had to defend his friends. But by the time of *the Wild Swans at Coole* the storm has blown over, and there is a return to calm and tranquility. The calm, tranquil summers, "sheltered from the worlds annoy", he had passed at Coole park and the sobering influence of Lady Gregory are reflected in the placid, picturesque landscape of the very opening poem of the collection :

*The trees are in their autumn beauty*
*The woodland paths are dry,*
*Under the October twilight, the water*
*Mirrors a little sky :*
*Upon the brimming water, among the stones,*
*Are nine and fifty swans.*

Here and there the poet might grumble as in *the People*,

*'What have I earned for all that work, I said,*
*'For all that I have done at my own charge' ?*
*The daily spite of this unmannerly town.*

but the anger is always subdued and there is no bitterness in it. The poet has acquired control over his passions and can keep his head. His self-mastery is seen in the dignity and unbiased self-analysis of poems like *Ego Dominus Tuns*. The poem presents the conflict between the poet's self and anti-self leading to a searching self-analysis.

**The Swan-symbol**

The Swan is a re-current symbol in the poetry of the period. The swans symbolise first, the life-force. Their hearts do not grow old, and their vigour is such that they climb the air instead of flying through it. Secondly, they stand for the union of the time with the timeless, the finite with the infinite, the individual soul with the Supreme. Thirdly, they stand for inspiration, for imagination, for the dreams of a poet. Fourthly, they represent glorying in passionate experience, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. Fifthly, they symbolise the solitary soul moving on its lonely journey through life. As *Stock* emphasises, "It is not a different swan standing for a different idea each time, nor yet a code-word for a fixed idea, but the same swan acting in different ways, much like a living bird: there is a cluster of thoughts which affect each other, and now one, now another, is in front".

**The Note of Reminiscence**

*The Wild Swans at Coole* contains, according to *D. Daiches*, some of Yeats' finest poetry of reminiscence often constructed in long irregular verse-paragraphs, which he handles with great skill—he draws more and more on family traditions and memories in an attempt to relate his past to his present through a common tradition that links him with his ancestors. "The Pollexfens—Alfred, William, and George—stalk through his verse adding family pride as a unifying emotion." The finest example of this poetry of reminiscence is the poems *In Memory of Major Robert Gregory*, and *Stock* regards it as, "the most genuinely commemorative of all the great English elegies." Robert Gregory was the son of lady Gregory and Yeats sorrow is

real, but its expression is subdued as is required by decency and good manners. The poet first recalls three other friends individually—Lionel Johnson, Synge and George Pollexfen—and then paints Robert Gregory as he lived and moved in his own country with such a passion of admiration that all the sorrow is that such a man should have passed away from the world.

**Aloofness from the World situation**

*The Wild Swans at Coole* was published in 1919 and surprisingly enough there is not a single reference to the Great War, and this according to *Stock*, shows that "Yeats was not an English poet", but an Irish poet rooted in Irish soil. While English poets re-acted variously to the war, which was a tremendous, collective experience for them, Yeats remained aloof from it. There is no reference to it even in the elegy on Major Gregory who died in the war. In *An Irish Airman Forsees His Death*, his cold and measured appraisal,

*Those that I fight do not hate,*
*Those that I guard do not love.*

must have appeared singularly alien to English readers at the time. When asked for a war poem, his cold answer was :

*I think it better that in times like these,*
*A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth*
*We have no gift to set a statesman right.*

However, we cannot fully endorse the views of *Stock*, for in the next collection of verse presently to be considered, he shows enough consciousness of the world-situation.

**The Love-lyrics**

The collection *i.e.*, *The Wild Swans* contains a number of fine love-lyrics as well. Growing old is the theme of some of them. The living beauty is for younger men, and not for old men like the poet who has become a,

"Triton worn out with dreams". But there is some consolation. Men improve with years, and those who have paid the price of service to Beauty (both artistic and physical beauty is suggested) will,

> .........*Dine at journey's end*
> *with Landor and with Donne.*

However, the poet's heart is still young in the group of poems addressed to Maud Gonne. The poet now sings "stubborn with his passion," and there is a brief, intense, but controlled, explosion of passion in lyrics like, "A Deep-sworn Love", and, "Thoughts form Propertius." The taut, fully shaped beauty of these love-lyrics has been admired by one critic after another.

**"Michael Roberts and the Dancer"—Awareness of the Contemporary Scene.**

*Michael Roberts and the Dancer*, 1921, a brief and not very memorable collection, has three remarkable poems—*Easter 1916*, *The Second Coming*, and *A Prayer for My Daughter*. *Easter 1916* is in the nature of a palinode. *In September 1913* the poet had sung his grief for romantic Ireland which he felt was dead and buried with O'Leary. He had expressed his contempt for the Irish who added pence to pence, and prayer to prayer, and could not appreciate heroism or nobility of character. But it were these very people who rebelled against the might of the English, knowing fully well that defeat and death was certain. O'Leary, Emmet, and Wolf Tone of the earlier poems were romantic heroes in line with Irish heroic tradition but the sixteen who were executed now and whose death the poet mourns in the lyric were a mixed lot, drawn from that very middle class upon which the poet had always looked down upon with contempt. But they had met death heroically, and out of their noble sacrifice, says the poet, "a terrible beauty is born." Their heroic self-sacrifice transformed them utterly. The expression "terrible beauty" is a contradiction in terms and is characteristic of Yeat's metaphysical habit of bringing together of opposites.

**Myth-making Habit**

The poem also illustrates the myth-making habit of the poet. His mythopoeic imagination transforms and modifies old myths to suit his purpose as well as makes new myths. Thus in the opening lines of the poem,

*I have met them at close of day*
*Coming with vivid faces*
*From counter or desk among grey*
*Eighteenth century houses.*

the impression created is that of some legendary or mythological figures coming out of the dead past and taking part in the activity of the present.

**The Note of Foreboding**

The Irish rising sank into the mind of the poet, and merged with his whole philosophy of history. Henceforth, the horror of violence and bloodshed haunted him, and his horror reinforced by the grim spectacle of the war is expressed in a number of poems. As *R. A. Scott James* puts it, "The spectacle of war in Europe and war in Ireland and quarrels between well-meaning men induced bitter reflections." Thus in *the Second Coming* the thought is still one of violence and destruction, but the setting is not Ireland but the world at large. The poet feels that the present historical cycle is drawing to a close and the doomsday is near :

*Things fall apart : the centre cannot hold*
*Mere anarchy is loose upon the world.*

The intensity of the poet's vision gives to the poem the force of a prophetic utterance. Judged against this threatening background, Yeats' *A Prayer for My daughter* gains in strength, "which makes the appeal to custom and ceremony something more than nostalgia for an aristocratic past." The field of vision, no doubt, narrows to the personal but there is the weight of historical consciousness behind it.

## "The Tower" and "The Winding Stair"—Full Maturity

*The Tower* and *The Winding Stair and other Poems* include the finest poems of Yeats ; Yeats is one of the greatest of English poets because of the poems included in these volumes. Poems like *Sailing to Byzantium*, *The Tower*, *Meditations in Time of Civil War*, *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*, *Leda and the Swan*, *Among School Children*, *A Dialogue of Self and Soul*, etc., are the sheer products of genius. They have greatness in them. By clarity of conviction and mastery of technique Yeats has reached the height of his power. He had mastered his craft, words obey his call, and he writes with perfect case and lucidity. He had already framed his *System*, his philosophy, enunciated in *the Vision*, this has provided him with a framework round which to organise his thoughts, and hence the rare imaginative intensity and power of his poetry. The maturity of the poet's art is seen in the fact that he again and again brings together opposites and is able to harmonise them, or weave them into a pattern. Thus in the admirable *Sailing to Byzantium*, which opens *The Tower* group of poems, the great contraries of youth and age, life and death, change and the changeless, and nature and art are brought together and each is shown as necessary for the completion of the other. In *The Tower* we get the antithesis between the physical decay in old age, and the mature mind "excited, passionate, fantastical." Further, the poet unites in the poem the imagined and the actual fusing daylight and moonlight in "one inextricable beam." The boundaries between the actual and the legendary have been obliterated. In *Le a and the Swan* we get a fusion of history, myth and vision. In compressing so much within a little span, the poet reaches perfection.

## The Tower and Winding Stair as Symbols

The tower and the winding stair are the key-symbols round which are organised a cluster of images. The tower symbolises solicitude, asceticism, night, and solitary intellect. The winding stair symbolises aspiration ascending upto heaven. It also symbolises the movements of the philosophi-

cal "gyres". According to *Daiches*, the winding stair is at once the symbol of progress combined with repetition, a mark of the transition from youth to old age. Attached to these symbols are many private associations and highly evocative images. In this way, the poems gain in richness and complexity of texture.

### Brutality and Coarseness

The poems illustrate Yeats' capacity of saying fine, brilliant things which startle and surprise. Often he achieves the ease and brilliance of a good conversationalist :

> *Where got I that truth ?*
> *Out of a mediums mouth,*
> *Out of nothing it came,*
> *Out of the forest loam.*

The poet writes with confidence : and he is conscious of his power, but this consciousness makes him plain spoken, and not only that, it often betrays him into brutality and coarseness. At other times, he adopts a mocking tone, and arrogantly mocks even at the wise and the good and the learned :

> *I declare my faith,*
> *I mock at Plotinus' thought,*
> *And cry in Plato's teeth.*

### Vein of Bitterness and Pessimism

Besides this vein of coarseness and arrogance, a vein of bitterness, of despair and pessimism also runs through *The Tower* group of poems. The poet has been brooding long and deep over violence and bloodshed both in Ireland and in the world at large and his thoughts are consequently gloomy and despairing. *Nineteen Hundred and Ninteen* is a heart-breaking poem. Lovely things have all gone, now days are "dragon ridden", and everywhere there is violence.

*Violence upon the roads ; violence of horses.* "Meditations in Times of Civil-War" is full of bitterness. He broods on the tragedies enacted on the "laborious stair" of "the stark Tower" ; he has fed his heart on fantasies, it has grown brutal from the fare and so finds,

*More substance in our enemies ;*
*Than in our love.*

**Renewed zest for life**

The bitterness and frustration of the poems of *The Tower* volume was caused as much by his brooding over Irish quarrels and the world situation as from ill-health. By the time of *The Winding Stair*, he had fully regained his health, and his re-newed zest for life is reflected everywhere. In *the Dialogue Between Self and Soul*, the poet's self chooses life even if it were to pitch, "Into the frog-spawn of a blind-man's ditch." The poem with its choice of life, is in sharp contrast with the choice of death in *The Tower.* As *Unterecker* emphasises, "Images of sterility" dominate *The Tower*, "regeneration and sexuality" act as shaping forces in *The Winding Stair.* "The focus is primarily on things masculine and political in *The Tower*, on things feminine and aesthetic in the *Winding Stair.*"

**Crazy-Jane group of Poems – Their Sexuality**

The poems of *The Tower and The Winding Stair* are difficult and intellectual, but most of the poems grouped under the heading *Words for Music Perhaps* and a *Woman Young and Old* are distinguished by their simplicity and directness. In these poems, Crazy-Jane, lusty and coarse, Jack, the Journeyman, and Tom, the lunatic, are everywhere. Yeats has been charged with revelling in coarseness and sexuality in these poems. There is, no doubt, that occasionally there is frank discussion of sexuality showing that the poet has not forgotten his youth and the excitement of living. Thus in *The Parting* and *A Last Confession* there is a frank glorying in sexuality which can come only from "a foolish, passionate old man," and he asks, "why should not old men be mad ?"

*How can, I, that girl standing there,*
*My attention fix,*
... ... ... ...
... ... ... ...
*O, that I were young again*
*And held her in my arms !*

**Their Simple Manner and Profound Philosophy**

Though the lines occur in *Politics*, a short lyric included in *the Last Poems and Plays*, they vividly bring out the tone of the poems under consideration. However, it would be wrong to say that there is all sexuality in these poems. As a matter of fact, as *Stock* points out, Yeats has put his profoundest philosophy in the mouth of Crazy-Jane and Tom, the lunatic. "To put a philosophy in homely terms and sing it light heartedly takes a completer understanding than any other way of expounding it". Philosophy cannot be reduced to simpler terms or sung more triumphantly than in the following :

*I had wild Jack for a lover*
*Though like a road*
*That man pass over,*
*My body makes no moan*
*But sings on :*
*"All things remain in God."*

Crazy-Jane is the mouth piece of Yeast' philosophy that wholeness is the union of opposites, a union which according to Crazy-Jane is achieved in the act of love. Fair and foul are near of kin, flesh and spirit demand each other, and "nothing can be sole or whole/that has not been rent." Crazy-Jane is not so very crazy after all. She is the medium through which the poet has expressed the profoundest truths in the simplest manner.

**Later Poetry—Its Richness and Complexity**

The distinctive feature of Yeats' later poetry is richness, complexity and intricacy. This richness arises, according to *Jeffares*, from, "the fullness of Yeats' life, because his style was reaching maturity at the same time as his life." This richness arises more particularly from his blending together of images drawn from widely divergent sources and from different layers of experience. The poems are organised round some central key-symbol ; but round that symbol there is a cluster of images highly evocative. Thus the tower symbol in itself is highly evocative, and suggestive. It puts us in mind of Shelley, Milton, Samuel Palmer and many others and in this way there is considerable heightening of effect. The swan and the winding stair are other key-symbols. Round these key-symbols are placed other subsidiary symbols which carry their own associations with them. The result is an impression of continuous vastness, expansion and complexity. As we read the poems, specially *The Tower* group of poems, layers after layers of experience unfold themselves each widening the horizon with increased aesthetic pleasure. Evocative words and phrases from other writers are used at times with increased richness of effect. At other times, the same symbol is used with different meanings in different contexts. Thus the swan-symbol has been used in a number of poems, but in each poem it carries a different connotation and evokes different associations. The effect created is one of immense vastness and richness. In this way, the poems are inter-locked and the study of one poem throws light on the subsequent poems using the same key-symbol. Yeast' work is one organic whole.

**Procession of Images**

Round these key-symbols, as pointed out above, are grouped a number of images. Yeats' images at this period of his maturity tend to come in endless procession. Not that a number of images are used together one after another, but that one image gives rise to another. Thus in *the Prayer for My Daughter* the Helen image evokes the

image of Aphrodite who "rose out of the spray" and chose, "a bandy-legged smith for man." This improper union at once suggests Maud Gonne's union with MacBride, and in this way the past is linked up with the present and the personal with the impersonal. This imparts an unrivalled richness and intricacy to the texture, and is a source of immense aesthetic pleasure for the careful reader. The word 'careful' is to be emphasised for it requires attention and concentration to follow Yeats' mature poetry, but the labour is worth while and rewarding. Yeats is not obscure, but rich and complex and hence difficult for the uninitiated reader.

**Simultaneous Compression and Expansion**

This brings us to a consideration of another peculiar feature of Yeats' later poetry. Yeats brings together varied and disparate images from different levels of experince and different levels of history and is able in this way to enclose incredible vastnesses within the limited space of a short lyric. Thus in the brief *Leda and the Swan*, the union of the Swan and Leda symbolises the union of the spiritual and the physical, of the human and the superhuman, of the god Zeus and a woman, of the mortal and the immortal. The reference to "burning roof and tower" puts one in mind of Helen and the destruction of Troy, which in its turn suggests the destructive beauty of Maud Gonne. Thus the past and the present are interlinked, and the poet's mastery is seen in his compressing such immensities in so little space. In this way, there is simultaneous compression and expansion, a miracle of art.

**Reconciliation of Opposites**

Indeed, the greatness of Yeats is seen in the fact that his mind now moves with great agility from one disparate concept to another, and the poet succeeds in bringing together and reconciling the antimonies of life. Such opposites as youth and age, spirit and flesh, knowledge and power, the past and the present, creation and destruction, change and immobility progress and fixity, etc., are

all fused into a single whole. As *David Daiches* puts it, such contradictions are not only rendered, they are also reconciled.

**The Metaphysical Note**

The learned critic calls such bringing together of life's antimonies a metaphysical habit of mind, for it is a characteristic feature of the poetry of Donne and his school. This very metaphysical habit of mind is further seen in the sudden tonal shifts of his poetry. We have already noted above that in the third line of *the Elegy on Major Robert Gregory* the tone is at once Elegiac and ironic. The short lyric *Men Improve with Years* opens on a note of calm serenity but soon changes to the poignant, burning intensity of the poet's despair at his vanished youth. Similarly, the poem *Made as the Mist and Snow* opens on a note of serenity and calm, detachment. But the tone soon changes first to one of desire and wistfull longing and then to the deep agony and despair of the last stanza.

**The Mythical Element**

The later poems display Yeats' mythopoeic imagination to its best advantage. No modern poet, says *Stock*, "has so much of the ancient mythopoeic gift as Yeats". He had always exploited classical and Irish mythology to the full, but now we find him creating new myths out of the lives of the people he knew. The poet is constantly seen in a reminiscent mood, constantly thinking of his relatives, friends, and fellow-workers. His imagination works on their lives or episodes in their lives and transforms them into something new, heroic and wonderful. Thus in *The Tower* poem his imagination works on various episodes connected with the lives of the people who lived around the tower and invests them with a new glory, beauty and symbolic significance. In the stories of Hanrahan and Mary Hynes the poet reads the story of his own life, and creates out of them personal myths of great charm. In *Easter 1916*, the impression is created that the poeple whom the poet has met "at close of day" belong to a past age, but have come out to play their parts in the present.

The suggestion is thus thrown out that the—the common men and women whom Yeats knew—had the heroic grandeur of the legendary figures of the past. It would be needless to cite further examples of the mythopoeic imagination of the poet transforming the petty and the common place and investing it with heroic grandeur. Poems like *Leda and the Swan* concentrate his whole sweeping conception of history into a gigantic myth that is a creation of his own, for though the figures come from ancient chronicle and legened, the pattern they are set in gives them a fresh significance.

**Increased Command over Language**

The poet's mastery over his craft is further seen in the fact that words obey his call and he uses them like a master with perfect ease and self-confidence to express swift transition in thought, often highly abstract thought. Words belonging to different levels are brought together and absorbed. Thus in *The Tower*, a poem pitched up to a heightened key, he can assimilate such colloquialism as "lock, stock and barrel," and uses expressions like a "dog's tail" to convey his bitterness at his loss of youth. Such sudden descent from the lofty to the earthly, says *Stock*, "is a dramatic use of language, which delivers judgment by changing the perspective." Even his occasional coarseness and brutality is a reflection of his increased command and self-confidence.

**Austerity of Diction**

His language has lost the pre-Raphaelite decorativeness of his earlier days, and has grown more trenchant and adoptable to a wider range of ideas. He can now put "the starkest facts into the starkest words." Though his characteristic manner of expression is still symbolic and oblique, yet, when it suits him, he can combine it effectively with a direct forthright statement of facts. His language is cold, bare, hard and clear-cut, but he also gives full value to melodious words, casually exploiting the riches of the language without forcing it. He was a laborious, painstaking artist, and his purpose was to convey his

thought clearly and precisely. His "style is stripped, and entirely depended on the intense life of the mind, for which it (his style) has been moulded into a perfect instrument." When he is difficult it is because of the thought and not because of the expression which is always clear and often has the virtues of direct, unaffected speech.

**Momentum of Natural Speech**

In one of his letters to *Prof. Grierson*, Yeats emphasised that the syntax of a poet must have a "natural momentum," and this is much more important than mere "simplicity of vocabulary." Yeats realised that without a "natural syntex, studied simplicity can be as artificial as studied grandiloquence." He, therefore, laboured hard to capture the 'natural momentum in the syntax" and the poetry of the period is a measure of his success. A Yeats' sentence is often spoken thought developing as it moves. Take for example :

*An affable irregular,*
*A heavily-built Falstaffian man.*
*Comes cracking jokes of civil war,*
*As though to die by gun shot were*
*The finest play under the sun.*

"Here is objective report with implied comment, and it would be impossible, by doing away with metre, to put it in a sentence more concisely clear. It differs from conversational talk only by the absence of every unnecessary word." Yeats has practised absolute economy without destroying 'the natural momentum' or the movement of natural speech. He maintains the formal pattern without losing the naturalness of phrase. "Yeats' later work always has the authentic ring of speech although he writes in metre" (*Stock*). The poems of the period have so much of nerve and movement that they seem to belong organically to actual life. In the words of Yeats himself, 'it is all speech rather than writing."

## Metre and Melody

Yeats later poetry also shows his skilful manipulation of the most varied stanza-patterns. As some one has rightly remarked, the credit of freeing the English lyric from the tyranny of the Iambic must go to Yeats. Prasing his skill in versification, *Stock* emphasises that no modern poet has mastered traditional stanza-patterns of the kind that Chaucer handed down to English poetry through Spenser and the romantics, and no poet of any time, "has written stanzas at once so rich in music and so compact in thought and phrase." Musical speech, accompained by a stringed instrument, had been his pre-occupation since earliest days, and as a result his ears were trained and sharpened to the stress and cadence of poetry. In this way, his lyrics have acquired an individual singing note, they are not actual songs, but there is a lilt in the words which is very near to music. *"They sing or chant themselves from sheer rightness of sound."* The lyrical tune is not imposed but grows from the words themselves, and this despite their intricacy. "The lightness of song comes not so much from simplicity as from a kind of assurance, when the tongue finds speech for what is believed in the bones, whether or not it echoes a common faith."

## Variety of Stanza Forms

At this time the Octosyllabic line is much in favour with the poet, partly because of its effectiveness in epigram, and partly because of its conversational suggestions. *David Daiches* notices an increase of freedom in the handling of rhythms, combined with a growing originality and variety in stanza-forms. He makes increasing use of a technique so commonly used by Donne : the thought moulds the pattern in the first stanza, and this stanza-pattern becomes the model for the succeeding stanzas. His poetry is often cast in long irregular verse-paragraphs which he manipulates with great skill ; he is equally at home in handling of the both long and short lines.

## Themes of the Later Poetry

*The Tower* and *the Winding Stair* group of poems

include, by common consent, the finest flower of Yeats' genius. There are two central themes : (1) pre-occupation with age and the vanishing of youth and beauty, and (2) the crisis of the present civilisation seen as part of the cyclic process of history. *Stock* defines the theme of his later poetry as, "a wrestling match between the soul in eternity and the soul in time, or the self or the heart as he variously calls it." This antimony between the two aspects of human personality is resolved by taking an extra-temporal point of view *i.e.,* by contemplating a reality lying outside time, as in the poem *Sailing for Byzantium.*

**Its Organic Unity**

However, it may be, the poetry of the period is a very mixed bag. Myth, history, politics, art, philosophy, friendsip, love—the range of his subject matter is immense. Yet all is fused into a single whole by his vision. And this is the true measure of his greatness. He himself realised that all his life he had been saying the same things in so many different ways.

# 13

## *The Last Phase :*
## *"An Old Man's Frenzy"*

*Cast a cold eye,*
*On life, on death,*
*Horseman, pass by—1938*

1. *The Full Moon in March, 1935.*
2. *Last Poems and Plays, 1936-1939.*

**The Two Strains—No Decline in Powers**

The Poems of this period include the collection of verses entitled *the Full Moon in March*, published in 1935, and the volume of verses including the poems written during 1936-1939, and published posthumously as *Last Poems and Plays*. As *F. R. Higgins* points out there are two strains running side by side in the poetry of the last phase : One, simple, bucolic, Rabelaisian, the other, intellectual, exotic or visionary. We may add that often in the same poem the two strains meet. He dances with joy, with gay abandon, and revels in sexuality, but at the same time also conveys his vision of life. *C. M. Bowra, Stephen Spender*, and *D. S. Savage* notice in the *Last Poems* a decline in Yeats poetic powers. *Bowra* finds in them a simplicity both in tone and texture and adds, there is not in them, "even the stern, majestic utterance of his mature work".

*D. S. Savage* criticises *the Last Poems* and says in them, "we have the glorification of violence and war, the celebration of sexuality, the same inner emptiness revealed either in an expression of a sense of personal futility or in the insistence upon a hysterical and nihilistic exultation." Such opinions arise only from a superficial reading or prejudice. Such fine poems as *Lapis Lazuli, The Municipal Gallery Revisited, The Statues* and *A Bronze Head* are in themselves a sufficient refutation of such criticism. Simplicity in vocabulary and diction does not mean triviality, and "the rich, dark" poems of the last phase continue to be as complex in poetic technique as the poems of the previous phase.

**Tragic Tone—Stoic Defiance**

The tone of these 'rich, dark' poems is tragic, even their gaiety is not merely ironical; it is the reverse, the other side of the tragic. This intensely tragic tone arises from three causes : the poet's awareness of increasing age, of the vanishing of Youth and Beauty as a result of the ravages of Time, his consciousness of social reality and the catastrophe that threatens the world, and from a feeling that his friends are no more and the past order and tradition have vanished. It is as if the poet sitting somewhere at a vantage point outside time or on the, "bill of the Muses", surveys the human civilisation, penetrates deep into the social, political and historical forces and realises the contradictions inherent in the human scene. He sees "blood and mire" all round, but finds consolation in his philosophy of the revolution of the gyres or the cyclic process of history.

*All things fall apart, and are built again,*
*And those that build them again are gay.*

Thus the tone is not one of despair or pessimism but one of stoic defiance and resistance to the destructive force out of which, as *F. L. Lucas* points out, tragedy is born. His own epitaph, quoted at the top of the present chapter, vividly brings out the mood of the poet in the last phase.

It is a mood of defiance, of cold detachment which looks on life and death undisturbed. Horsemen are symbolic of bravery and heroism, and is like a horseman that Yeats faced life upto the very end, unworried as to what death had in store for him.

**The Poet's Longing for Passionate Experience**

The poet was growing old in comfortable circumstances. He was happily married, he was above want, and had achieved fame and recognition. He had achieved an understanding of life and its problems, but this worried him. His letters to Olivia Shakespeare at this time again and again show that he feared that, 'knowing all', he would, "grow to nothing", that understanding would make him incapable of passionate experience, of that passionate excitement which is the source of all poetry. Since all his questioning was at rest, he would grow more and more serene and satisfied, and thus his poetic vein would dry up. That is why we find him repeatedly praying for 'passion' for 'folly', the sources of poetic inspiration :

*O' what I am, that I should not seem,*
*For the song's sake a fool ?*

And in A *Prayer for Old Age*, he exclaims,

*I pray*

... ... ... ...

*That I may seem, though I die old,*
*A foolish, passionate Old man.*

This very prayer is repeated in *An Acre of Grass*, in *What then* ?, in *Are You Content* ? and is implicit in a host of other poems. The poet wishes to remake himself, prays for a frenzy proper to an old man, in short, longs to be a passionate old man, for 'passion' means capacity for fresh personal experience and fresh poetry. He repeated this prayer so earnestly, and made such earnest attempt to rejuvinate himself that, says *Stock*, "it kept his mind active to the last days of his life and made him, of all

poets who have written of old age, the least tranquilizing and the most exhilarating".

**Passionate Indignation**

As a result of his earnest prayers and constant efforts, the poet underwent a process of renewal. He could attain the frenzy 'proper to old men', he could re-make himself. His passions returned, and the first to return was rage, his capacity for indignation at the vulgarity, the coarseness, and the brutality of life. In the verses included in the volume *A Full Moon in March*, his anger rages over things, natural and supernatural, "and much of it is set to swinging, irresponsible tunes, suggesting not so much anger as a delighted realisation that he could still be angry" (*Stock*). This makes *Parnell's Funeral*, the bitterest political poem of Yeats. Parnell was a popular Irish hero, but as a result of a sex-scandal the people turned against him and dragged him down. The entire episode was an exhibition of the unreasoning hatred of mean minds ; it excited the poet's imagination and taught him the meanness of popular passions. Indignantly he cries out,

*Hysterico Passio dragged this quarry down.*
*None spared our guilt, nor did we play a part*
*Upon the painted stage, when we devoured his heart.*

Parnell was a great hero and patriot destroyed his own people ; this meant an age of heroes was giving place to the tyranny of the unthinking mob :

*An age is the reversal of an age.*

The era of the legendary heroes of old was coming to an end and was being replaced by the chaos of dark passions. The bitterness in the poem is the bitterness of disillusionment.

**Glorification of Sex**

In *the Supernatural Songs*, the most passionate poems in the collection, he sets forth his philosophy im-

personally, through the person of Ribh, an heretical Irish monk. He is impatient of the universal tolerance of Christian lore, "and denounces all formulated thoughts of God as fiercely as any Puritan denouncing image-worship". He glorifies hatred for, "Hatred of God may bring Soul to God." One is reminded of Donne, for in *the Supernatural Songs* there is the same religious passion, and the same violence of sexual imagery. Yeats protests against the Chritian ascetic's separation of the boy and the soul, and asserts that man becomes the image of God through intensity of passion, and not through denial of it. "Eternity is passion", and sexual love is a part of the divine essence :

*As man, as beasts, as the ephemeral fly begets,*
*Godhead begets Godhead,*
*For things below are copies* ... ...

Sexual love is a copy of divine love, imperfect only because of the imperfections of our earthly life. Lovers freed by death from their gross bodies may attain to a perfect union as angels do. The idea possessed him, and sexual union seemed to him, "the most perfectly attainable copy of divine ecstasy." Therefore, the poet asks, "Why should not old men be mad ?" and wishes to be young again ;

*How can I, that girl standing there,*
*My attention fix*
... ... ... ...
... ... ... ...
*But O that I, were young again,*
*And held her in my arms.*

**Nostalgic Yearning for the Past**

The last poems written in the last four years of his life are a magnificent return to his former vigour and zest for life. They show a greater range, says *Stock*, a greater, "intensity of feeling and variety of style than any book he had written yet". It is true that his most violent personal expe-

rience was all in the past. He would never know again the violence of his passion for Maud Gonne, the intensity of his devotion to lady Gregory and Coole Park, nor grieve for anything in human history as he had grieved for the burning down of the old Irish houses and the disappearance of the "big house tradition." But his mind was richly stored with memories, the past was still alive in his mind, and tnese memories, both personal and impersonal, fire many a fine piece in *the Last Poems*. *The Municipal Gallery Re-visited* is the finest of these poems of reminiscence. Memories of the past cluster round him, memories which are in his very blood, and which revive past dreams, past ideas and past conflicts. His nostalgia for a vanished past imparts a tragic atmosphere to the whole poem. Memories are personal but they are narrated in such a way that they acquire a general and universal significance.

**Brooding over the Contemporary Scene**

Some of the best of these last poems are written out his brooding over history and the contemporary scene. The years from 1936 to 1939 were years of frustration, years of growing realisation that another war was in the offing and war hysteria and the fear of air raids kept on mounting. The atmosphere was tense, and the worst was apprehended. In one poem after another, Yeats broods over the impending crisis, and speaks with detachment and aloofness as if he were a voice outside Time. In *the Gyres* he foresees the end of civilisation. *The Old Rocky Face*, a sculptured stone-head, symbolises the poet's inner consciouness', stillness in the centre of Time's flux, and the impassive gaze of the poet. The poet stands aloof like the Rocky Face, links up the present with three thousand years of history, and sees physical and moral downfall :

*What matter though numb nightmare rides on top,*
*And blood and mire the sensitive body stain.*

And further,

*Conduct and work grow coarse, and coarse the soul.*

rience was all in the past. He would never know again the violence of his passion for Maud Gonne, the intensity of his devotion to lady Gregory and Coole Park, nor grieve for anything in human history as he had grieved for the burning down of the old Irish houses and the disappearance of the "big house tradition." But his mind was richly stored with memories, the past was still alive in his mind, and these memories, both personal and impersonal, fire many a fine piece in *the Last Poems*. *The Municipal Gallery Re-visited* is the finest of these poems of reminiscence. Memories of the past cluster round him, memories which are in his very blood, and which revive past dreams, past ideas and past conflicts. His nostalgia for a vanished past imparts a tragic atmosphere to the whole poem. Memories are personal but they are narrated in such a way that they acquire a general and universal significance.

**Brooding over the Contemporary Scene**

Some of the best of these last poems are written out of his brooding over history and the contemporary scene. The years from 1936 to 1939 were years of frustration, years of growing realisation that another war was in the offing and war hysteria and the fear of air raids kept on mounting. The atmosphere was tense, and the worst was apprehended. In one poem after another, Yeats broods over the impending crisis, and speaks with detachment and aloofness as if he were a voice outside Time. In *the Gyres* he foresees the end of civilisation. *The Old Rocky Face*, a sculptured stone-head, symbolises the poet's inner consciousness', stillness in the centre of Time's flux, and the impassive gaze of the poet. The poet stands aloof like the Rocky Face, links up the present with three thousand years of history, and sees physical and moral downfall :

*What matter though numbs nightmare rides on top,*

*And blood and mire the sensitive body stain.*

And further,

*Conduct and work grow coarse, and :oarse the soul.*

But all this does not matter. The poet does not despair : he does not give way to pessimism. Rooted in his philosophy of the cyclic process of history, and the revolutions of the gyres, the poet is sure that what has been, must be once again, and the old values he loves are sure to revive, for,

> *The workman, noble and saint, and all thing run,*
> *On that unfashionable gyre again.*

In his earlier poetry he had escaped from the present into a fairyland : now his philosophy itself becomes a sort of fairyland providing him with an escape from the frustrations of the present.

**Inhumanity of the Last Poems**

In *Lapis Lazuli*, the three Chinamen climb a high mountain peak, look at the tragic spectacle, and are gay,

> *Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,*
> *Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.*

There is, no doubt, that in all great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies. But to most readers, such poems would appear cold-blooded and inhuman. "We that look on but laugh in tragic joy," must certainly be unpalatable to those who are the victims of that tragedy. *Louis Macneice* has charged Yeats with "a constitutional inhumanity." *Stock* agrees with this estimate and admits that, no doubt, there is certain hardness in the last poems, "the spirit of Yeats' poetry is not compassionate." However, we may add that Yeats is warm and full of feeling when he speaks of Irish men and women, at least of those whom he knew and remembered. "He could not feel for abstract multitudes, but his heart throbs with humanity and love where there are personal associations." When he thinks of his dead friends as in *Beautiful Lofty Things*, in *The Municipal Gallery Revisited*, and in a host of other poems, his verse is full of poignant regret and throbs with human feelings. Then he forgets his stand out of time, then he is no longer

a disembodied voice out of the Timeless, but a living human being whose glory was that he had "such friends." His cold detachment is overcome and his voice grows lyrical and passionate. He may not have compassion for common suffering humanity that our modern sensibility fosters, but, "in such personal, particularised generosity of feeling no modern poet stands anywhere near Yeats."

**The Reconciliation of Opposites**

*A Bronze Head*, one of the finest poems of the last phase, was inspired by a sculptor's study of Maud Gonne in her old age. The poem is both a portrait and a re-interpretation of her character in the light of his fuller understanding of all that she stood for. Her beauty symbolised for him the highest ideals and perfections of the Greek-world, but her actions linked her up in his mind with mob fury and violence. He tried to re-concile the two in the earlier *No Second Troy* by blaming an unworthy age for her violence. But now he explains her conduct with reference to the supernatural. She seems to him to have been guided and controlled by some supernatural power. Now it seems to him as if some sterners supernatural eye looked through her :

*Or else I thought her supernatural :*
*As though a sterner eye looked through her eye*
*On this foul world in its decline and fall.*

In the last phase, as in the earlier ones, the poet seeks to re-concile the opposites, or the antimonies of life. In this poem, and in several others, he has recourse to the supernatural to resolve the conflict. The influence of the philosophy of Plotinus is strong upon him, and he often takes an extra-mundane and an extra-temporal point of view. Writing from outside time, "he achieves the final resolution of opposities". (*David Daiches*)

**The Fusion of the Natural and the Supernatural**

In his poems on sexual passion there is a similar fusion of the natural with the supernatural. He finds the animal

and the divine, the soul and the body, to be but shadows of one another. This duality runs through the admirable lyric *The Wild Old Wicked Man* and the ballad-lyric sequence *The Three Bushes*. For the lover the body and the soul are not different, as they derive from the same source, the divine, the *supernal* old man somewhere in the sky. It is on a woman's breast that the torn, restless soul of the wicked old man finds rest and peace. However, it may be noted that such rest is only for a while. "The conflict is resolved only for the time being. A permanent solution eludes the grasp of the poet."

**The two Eternities of Man**

The most careful and explicit expression of Yeats' faith is to be found in the admirable concluding poem *Under Ben Bulben*. The poet believes in the immortals, and in man's "two eternities of race and soul," and in the integrity that is achieved only through battle. He believes that the human life is meant to realise "the profane perfection of mankind" through these two eternities. Art expresses visions of divine perfection, and man should try to achieve that perfection. The poet believes that the present phase of civilisation is coming to an end, and exhorts Irish poets and artists to re-create it from the most ancient elements of Irish life :

*Irish poets, learn your trade,*
*Sing whatever is well made.*

The poem ends with the poet's epitaph quoted above, which express his confidence and determination to meet whatever may come to his soul from eternity.

**Difficulty and Obscurity : Causes**

*The Last Poems* have been criticised as obscure. They may not be obscure, but they are certainly difficult to follow. This difficulty partly arises from the condensed language—usually simple in vocabulary but packed with meaning—and partly from abrupt transitions in thought, but chiefly from the "sheer concentration into his phrases

of years of passionate and lonely thought." Everything that is superfluous is discarded, while everything significant in a given situation is absorbed and pithily expressed. Further, he moves swiftly through different phases of time and calls up discordant and dissimilar images after images with their manifold associations, from different levesl of history. Thus the poems gain in intricacy and richness of texture, but the result is increased difficulty for the reader. This is seen in that admirable, but very difficult and even obscure poem, *The Statues*. The imagery and the symbols concentrate within themselves layers of meaning. The ancient is linked up with the present and an effect of the continuity of time is created. The Grecian statues suggesting order and precision are linked up with the figure of Cuchulian rich with associations of heroism. The mention of Pearse links up the past with the present. The phrase, "lineaments of a plumet measured face" suggests the classic beauty of Maud Gonne. Not only that, Buddha is brought in to create an eastern atmosphere, and the cat Grimalkin brings with it suggestions of medieval magic and witchcraft. All this complexity and intricacy of the image-pattern treated with great terseness and compression, all these sudden transitions from one level of history to another, result in much difficulty for the readers.

### The Nature of Yeats' Philosophy

This very obscurity is further increased by the peculiar nature of Yeats' philosophy, which is a combination of medieval magic and oriental mysticism. "The central thought of the poem is recondite, for in it the poet has concentrated a vast range of lonely thought and feeling." Yeats' philosophy is peculiar to him, it is highly individual and not traditional. For the general mind darkness and emptiness are symbols of terror and negation of life, but for Yeats. "Where there is nothing there is God." The spirit of God, the infinite, moves where there is darkness and emptiness. The thought is new and strange, and hence the difficulty which is experienced in following such poems as *the Statues*.

**The Assimilation of the Poet's Philosophy**

However, philosophy creates difficulty only so long as it is not assimilated and does not become a part of life itself. The philosophy which makes *the Statues* so very difficult creates no difficulty in *the Long-legged Fly*, for by that time it has passed into the very nerves, the very marrow-bone of the poet. It has been fully assimilated and so, "The words move with ease, the images are living and natural, the abstraction vanishes into them so completely that one wonders how it had ever seemed obscure, and yet in gaining clarity it loses nothing of its depth" (*Stock*).

**Symbols of the Last Phase**

Thus the last poems combine simplicity of vocabulary and diction with complexity and intricacy of image-pattern and profundity of thought. Another thing to note is that the elaborate symbol system of *the Tower* and the *Winding Stair* has disappeared, as the rose symbol had vanished earlier. There is no mention at all of any swan. He still uses symbols, but he picks them up as they come to hand, from legend, history or common everyday life, and invests them with a new significance and depth of meaning. "His thoughts turn again and again to the supernatural, and everything he touches is a lense through which to focus the supernatural." It is with reference to the supernatural that the poet now seeks to resolve the antimonies of life.

**Conclusion**

*The Last Poems* are our warrant for asserting that the poet was constantly "re-making himself", constantly rijuvenating himself and his outlook. They are great, for their creator has succeeded in retaining the frenzy "proper to an old man", and, "an old man's eagle mind." He retained the fullness of his powers upto the very end, and the poems under study are an expression of that power. We cannot agree with critics who see in them a falling off, a decline.

14

# *W. B. Yeats : Symbolism ; Influence of the French Symbolists*

**Yeats : A Great Symbolist**

*Arthur Symons* dedicated his book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* to Yeats and called him, "the chief representative of that movement in our country," and other critics have agreed with him. Thus *W. Y. Tyndall* says that Yeats was a symbolist and he was a symbolist from the beginning of his career to the end. We would first examine the nature and function of a symbol and then consider Yeats' own use of them and the influence of the French symbolist Movement on him.

**Symbolism : Nature and Function**

Symbols are essentially words which are not merely *connotative*, but also *evocative* and *emotive*. In addition to their meaning, they also call up or evoke before the mind's eye a host of associations connected with them, and are also rich in emotional significance. For example the word 'lily' merely connotes a 'flower, but it also evokes images of beauty and innocence. It also carries with it the emotional overtone of pity resulting from suffering or oppression. In this way, through symbols a writer can express much more than by the use of ordinary words ; symbols make the language rich and expressive. Concepts which by their very nature are inexpressible can be convey-

ed in this way. Thus a symbol can be used to convey "pure sensations", or the poet's apprehension of transcendental mystery. That is why *C. M. Bowra* regards symbolic poetry as a kind of mystic poetry, a poetry in which the poet tries to convey his sense of the mystery of life. *Edmund Wilson* defines symbolism, as an attempt by carefully studies means—a complicated association of ideas represented by a medley of metaphors—to communicate unique personal feeling." In symbolic poetry the poet communicates (1) unique personal feeling and (2) he makes use of image—words for the purpose. Symbolism is essentially an oblique or indirect mode of expression which suggests much more than is actually described or asserted. It deals with the Infinite and the Absolute, and, in the words of Yeats, gives "dumb things voices and bodiless things bodies."

**Symbols : Their Kinds**

Symbolism is an oblique mode of saying things, and hence it is that symbolic art is difficult, complex and even obscure. Symbols may be of two kinds (*i*) *traditional* and (*ii*) *personal*. Traditional symbols are stock symbols which have been in general use. For example,' rose' is a traditional symbol of beauty, and has been used by poets from the earliest times. As most readers are familiar with such stock symbols, their use increases the evocative pleasure of poetry without introducing elements of complexity or obscurity. Personal symbols, on the other hand, are devised by the poet for his own purposes, to express the vague fleeting impressions passing through his mind, or to convey his own sense of the mystery of life. They express the poet's experiences, often mystical in nature. As the readers are not familiar with such symbols, they create difficulties for them, though at the same time they enhance the richness of the language.

**The French Symbolist Movement**

Much has been made of the influence of *the French Symbolist Movement* on Yeats. Symbols have always been

used by poets. William Blake, a symbolist and mystic, uses the tiger as a symbol for the beauty and mystery of the reality at the back of the sensuous. However, symbolism as a conscious movement did originate in France as a re-action against naturalism and the precision and exactitude of the 'naturalist' school represented by Zola. The French symbolists, headed by *Mellarme*, condemned mere "exteriority", and laid great emphasis on, "the treatment of the sensations" or the representation of the vague, fleeting impressions that constantly pass before the mind's eye. It meant a withdrawal from life, a concentration on inner experience and its expression through the use of symbols. '*Arthur Symons*' views in this connection are worth quoting: "The doctrine of mysticism with which all symbolic literature has so much to do, of which it is all so much the expression presents us with a theory of life which makes us familiar with mystery, and which seems to harmonise those instincts which make for religion, passion and art, freeing us at once of a great bondage."

**Its Influence on Yeats : His Theories**

Yeats did not know French and it is doubtful that he ever met *Mellarme.* Whatever knowledge of the French symbolistic technique he had was derived at second hand through *Arthur symons*' translations of the works of *Mellarme, Villiers* and other French symbolists or through discussions with him. His own theories of symbolism are derived wholly from those of Arthur Symons. After meeting with him in the nineties, he repudiated his former theories of art. Earlier, he had advocated that Irish writers, to serve the cause of Irish nationalism, should revive Celtic mythology and legend. They should fix upon their memories the appearances of mountains and rivers and make it visible in all their arts. But now he advocated the ideal of art for art's sake. He advocated a rejection of all, "Impurities, curiosities about politics, about science, about history, about religion." Mere exteriority was to be rejected in the interest of concentration on inner experience. This return to imagination implied a new technique of expression. "We must cast out of serious poetry those

energetic rhythms, as of a man running," and the use of "those wandering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time." Art must be freed from all that is casual, "from all character and circumstance." Further, he advocated the use of symbols, "You cannot give a body (*i.e.*, expression) to something that moves beyond the senses, unless your words are as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious life, as the body of a flower, or a woman." Words were to be used for their evocative and emotive value so that the poet might convey his complex states of mind, his apprehension of the absolute, or the vague. fleeting sensations constantly passing through the mind."

**Symbolism in the "Wind among the Reeds" : Its Complexity**

The influence of these theories is clearly seen in the *Wind Among the Reeds*, 1898. Yeats had also used symbols in his earlier works as well, but the early symbolism was quite simple,traditional and elementary. Thus his Innisfree symbolises a utopia, a country of the mind, where one can live in peace, away from the fever and fret of the world. In the *Rose group* of poems, the rose is a traditinol symbol of love and Beauty. Yeats uses it for absolute Beauty, for absolute Peace, and evokes a sense of suffering, a nostalgia for something unattainable. More often than not, the suggested meaning is stated explicity by the poet himself. When he poetises some Irish legend as the wanderings of Oisin, the poet himself takes care to explain the suggested or symbolic significance of the legend. But in the poems of the volume *the Wind among the Reeds* where he still uses Irish lenged and mythology, his symbolism becomes personal, more suggestive and so more complex. He now clothes, "his personal feelings and emotions in an elaborate garb of mythological symbolism." As he himself tells us, in this volume, "personal emotion is woven into a general pattern of myth and symbol." Particular moods of the poet's consciousness are personified and given Irish names. Thus Aedh, Hanrahan, Robertes etc., are used as symbols to express the poet's own love, pain, suffer-

ing, and ecstasy. The poems, one after another, deal with an absolute Beauty seen by the poet in an impersonal vision, but invested with a profound personal significance. And his vision of impersonal Beauty always takes the form of Maud Gonne. The Sidhe. the Fairies, Aengus, the Celtic gods, the shadowy horses, all have traditional mythological significance, but Yeats infuses them all with a personal meaning and significance. Thus Sidhe, the defeated Gaelic gods, are creatures of imagination and are used as symbols to emphasise the severence between the real and the imaginary. Thus there are two plains of meaning : one traditional for the uninitiated reader, and the other personal and symbolic. Yeats' expression thus gains in richness and complexity.

**Yeats and the French Symbolists : Distinguishing Features**

However Yeats' use of symbols differs from that of the French symbolists in several ways. For one thing, he soon grew out of the French influence and returned once more to life and reality. His next volume of verses, *The Seven Woods*, marks the beginning of this change; but he continued to use symbols upto the very end. Yeats was a symbolist from the beginning, and he remained a symbolist upto the end. It was not the French influence which made him a symbolist. As *V.K. Narayan Menon* puts it, "He stayed outside the movement, watching it from outside, and making use of its methods." He went to it merely in search of a new aesthetics.

**Modifying Influence of Magic and Nationalism**

Secondly, his symbolism is different from the French symbolism as it is mixed up modified and by (1) his belief in magic, and (2)by his nationalism. In his *Essay on Magic* he tells us this : there is a *Great Memory* and a *Great Mind*, and the purpose of his poetry is to evoke this great memory and this great mind. In this use of symbols, his theories of magic play a great part. Thus the symbol becomes for him, "a worker of wonders, a caller-up of angels or of devils." Often his symbols are both poetic and magical and cannot be understood without reference to his theories

of magic. Thus he himself tells us that his Michael Robertes is fire reflected in water, Hanharan is fire blown by the wind, and Aedh is fire burning by itself.

**Precision and Solidity**

Moreover, his symbolism is deeply rooted in Irish mythology and legend and this gives it a precision, a definiteness, a clarity which is lacking in French symbolism. His symbols are not vague and blurred, but have definite visual forms, and so are less obscure. Yeats describes his symbols in all their elaborate details, as in the following :

> "*I hear the Shadowy Horses, their long manes ashake,*
> *Their hoofs heavy with tumult, their eyes glimmering white.*

We do not find such concrete details, such descriptions, and the resulting solidity, in the symbols of Mellarme and other French symbolists. *Edmund Wilson* rightly points out that, "Yeats in transplanting his symbolism to Ireland gave it a strange and national quality." As *W. Y. Tyndall* puts it, his symbols differ from those ordinarily employed by the French, "in that they are traditional, systematic, more arbitrary and definite in outline".

**All-pervasive Key-symbols**

There is yet another characteristic of 'Yeats' symbolism which distinguishes it from French symbolism. His symbols are all pervasive. There are certain key-symbols round which a number of poems are organised and each succeeding poem throws light on the previous poems and "illuminates their sense." Thus in *the Rose Volume* of verses rose is the key symbol. In these poems, rose symbolises intellectual Beauty, beauty of women, more specially that of Maud Gonne, austerity, and also Ireland. Such symbols are not suddenly adopted but have their roots in mythology and legend. Similarly in *the Wild Swans at Coole*, the swan is the ever-recurring symbol. Another recurring symbol in Yeats' poetry is Helen symbolising destructive beauty, and the linking-up of Helen with Dierdre and Maud Gonne imparts to the poems like *No*

*Second Troy* an unimaginable vastness, complexity and continuous expansiveness.

**Complexity and Richness**

As Yeats' art matured, his symbols became more and more personal and complex. This complexity is seen in the poems included in *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* group of poems. The tower is both a traditional and a personal symbol. It was an actual tower where Yeats lived for sometime, and it is also used as a symbol to suggest loneliness and isolation, a secluded retreat for the poet. The symbol is also rich in associations. It evokes memories of *Milton* and *Shelley*,

*He has ..... chosen this place to live in*
*Because, it may be, of the candle light*
*From the far tower where Milton's Platonist*
*Sat late, or Shelley's visionary prince.*

At other times, the tower becomes a symbol of tradition, of national heritage, and at still other times a symbol of violence, and of blood, thirstiness :

*A bloody, arrogant power*
*Rose out of the race,*
*Uttering, mastering it,*
*Rose like these walls from these*
*Storm-beaten cottages.*

In *A Prayer for My Daughter* the tower suggests his vision of the dark future of humanity. All these associations and suggestions linked up with the tower make it a highly complex symbol. While they enhance the beauty and richness of the poems, they are a stumbling block in the way of the readers. Equally complex is the symbolism in *the Byzentium* group of poems. Such intricate symbols add to the obscurity of Yeats' poetry.

**Conclusion**

To conclude : Yeats was a symbolist from the beginning of his career upto the very end, even before and after the brief period of French influence. As his powers mature, his symbols gained in associative richness, evocative power and intricacy. Symbolism helped him to give concreteness to his visions and trances. It was in this way that he could convey his vague fleeting sensations to his readers. Symbolism enabled him to express, "the richness of man's deeper reality" (*Tyndall*), something essentially mystical.

15

# *Yeats as a Lyric Poet : His Love-Lyrics*

**Yeats, a Lyrical Genius**

Yeats' father preferred dramatic poetry to the lyrical, for the former has clarity and firmness of outline, while the latter is vague and blurred. Yeats began his poetic career by writing poetic plays after plays in imitation of Shelley and Spenser. However, his genius was essentially lyrical, and the Lyric impulse penetrates even his dramas. His dramas are in the nature of elaborate lyrics, and the songs scattered all over them constitute their main charm. Both by virtue of the quantity and quality of his lyrics, Yeats is entitled to the rank of one of the greatest lyric poets of England. Lyrics came to him as naturally as, "leaves to a tree."

**His Lyrics : Four Categories**

Yeats' lyrics may roughly be divided into four broad categories (1) Lyrics of escape (2) Political lyrics (3) Lyrics of reminiscence, and (4) love lyrics. The division is not watertight or absolute for the different categories constantly mingle and over-lap, and there is much that is not properly covered by any of the divisions. Thus his political lyrics have also an element of reminiscence and *the Supernatural Songs* are not covered by any of these categories. Such categorisation is done only for the convenience of study.

**Early Escape-Lyrics**

During the early years of his career, the poet mainly writes escape-lyrics. The reality is dissatisfying, and the

poet dreams of a fairy world where life is free from the fever and fret and weariness of reality. *The Song of the Happy Shepherd*, *The Stolen Child*, *The Man Who Went to Fairyland*, *Down by the Sally Gardens*, etc, take us to a dream-world where the characters dance with fairies and enjoy the pleasures of fairyland. Yeats' early volumes of verses, *The Crossways*, 1889, and *The Rose* 1893, include some of his finest and most widely anthologised lyrics. Thus the *Lake Isle of Innisfree* in which the poet expresses his wistful longing for a utopian world where he would live peacefully in a bee-loud glade is the most popular of the poems of Yeats. It was praised by *R. L. Stevenson* as, "It is so quaint and airy, simple, artful and eloquent to the heart." The words strike the key-note of Yeats' early lyrics. The *naive* charm, the very spirit of folk-lore, "the spirit which makes a folk-song go round the world from generation to generation without being questioned", has been captured by Yeats, and it is this spirit which constitutes their peculiar charm. The vague and blurred imagery, Pre-Raphaelite decoration use of poetic words and soft haunting incantatory music, heighten the dreamy atmosphere and help to transport the readers to fairyland.

**Later Escape lyrics**

However, even in this early period it is not all singing with an irresponsible delight. Even at this stage, the poet is conscious of reality, and knows that a withdrawal from life and responsibility may be the "world's bane." This feeling finds a vivid expression in that admirable lyric, *The Happy Townland*. The poet continued to write escape lyrics, but there is a lot of difference between the early and later escape lyrics. *The Byzantium* lyrics are the finest of his later escape-lyrics and clearly bring out this difference. The earlier lyrics are characterised by lightness and simplicity, the later ones by elaboration, complexity, richness and hardness of tone. Instead of the earlier sentimental, wistful tone, we get a sense of suffering and purification through facing the ordeal of life. In the former ones, the poet escapes into an enchanted, utopian world,

in the later, he wants to mount or rise through self-knowledge and self-purification to a world of "unageing intellect" lying somewhere outside Time. The enchanted atmosphere, poetic vocabulary, vague imagery and haunting music, are now replaced by prose-rhythms, hard words, and glittering images.

## Political Lyrics

Yeats' political lyrics are among the finest ever penned by him. At first sight it would appear that politics, essentially topical, is not a fit subject for poetry. But such is Yeats' art that he has succeeded in transforming the topical into the general and investing it with a universal significance. A well know critic puts it, "he transmutes his observation into a state of mind, into an intensely felt personal emotion, and finally raises it to an impersonal level." In this way, the contemporary and the topical is transmuted into a fit subject for poetry. *Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation*, *September 1913*, *Easter 1916*, *Meditations in Times of Civil War* and *Sixteen Dead Men* are some of his finest lyrics inspired by the political scene in Ireland. The lyrics display a maturity of Yeats' art. He can now reconcile the personal with the impersonal, and the particular with the universal. In them, he achieves a rare union of simplicity with intricacy of thought and intensity of emotion. They also show Yeats' mythopoeic imagination at its best. For example, in *Easter 1916* we get,

*I have met them at close of day,*
*Coming with vivid faces,*
*From counter or desk among grey,*
*Eighteenth century Houses.*

and thus the impression is created that the characters concerned belong to some ancient past and have come out of it to play their part in contemporary politics in order to help Ireland in her freedom struggle. Different characters stand for different modes of life. As *C. M.*

*Bowra* puts it, he creates a mythology from philosophers, statesmen, patriots, mystics, etc. The lyric is intensely personal. "It shows the over-whelming effect which the rebellion had on Yeats, and shows it so sincerely, so directly that its rhythms haunt the memory" (*C. M. Bowra*) The political lyrics are aflame with passion, and in this way a subject of little poetical interest is made moving and significant. They express the poet's disillusionment with the Irish people and his bitterness at their meanness and selfishness. Many of the martyrs of the Irish rebellion were his friends and so the poet felt their martyrdom deeply as a personal loss. All this gamut of personal emotions is poignantly expressed by these political lyrics. The poems are remarkable for their complexity and simplicity. They are bare and austere in expression but packed with thought and emotion.

Not the Irish scene alone, but the contemporary world situation also inspired Yeats to write such fine lyrics as *The Second Coming*, and *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.* His intense consciousness of impending horror, of some approaching doom, gives to these lyrics the immediacy and urgency of a prophecy. In *the Second Coming* specially the whole philosophy of history has been condensed into a little space so that the lyric is marked with a moment of insight, the poet's mystic vision, into a formidable future.

**Lyrics of Reminiscence**

Yeats' lyrics of reminiscence include such moving lyrics as *In Memory of Major Robert Gregory*, *The Municipal Gallery Revisited*, *Among School Children*, "*Introductory Rhymes*" *to Responsibilities*, etc. 'In his poetry of Reminiscence—often constructed in long irregular verse paragraphs, which he handles with great skill—he draws more and more on family memories and traditions : we see Yeats once again trying to relate his past to his present, this time through a common tradition that links him with his ancestors. "The Pollexfens—Alfred, William and George—stalk through his verse adding family pride as a

unifying emotion" (*David Daiches*). As *Stock* puts it, "in *Memory of Majar Robert Gregory* is the most genuinely commemorative of all the English elegies. In poignancy of feeling it is superior to *Lycidas* and *Adonais*." *W. H. Auden* regards it as something new and important in the history of the English lyric. The poet's sorrow is real, for his loss was personal and its expression though restrained is profoundly moving. Yeats recalls not only Major Gregory, but three other friends individually in a few lines, friends whom he loved and whom he had lost. Lyrics like *Beautiful Lofty Things* and *The Municipal Gallery Re-visited* are full of poignant regret for the irrecoverable. They are expressions of profound personal grief at the loss of friends and relatives who will never live again. Yeats has been accused of coldness, of "lack of humanity", but there is no coldness in Yeat's lyrics of reminiscence. They throb with human passion. "In such personal, particularised generosity of feeling no modern poet stands anywhere near Yeats (*Stock*).

**Yeats as a Love Poet**

Yeats is a great love-poet and the bulk of his lyric-poetry deals with love. In his early love-lyrics, love is a vague, fleeting emotion, the poet is more in love with love itself than with any particular lady. His heroes wander in fairyland in the quest of imaginary ice-eyed queens, modelled after the wild, passionate heroines of Shelley. It was his meeting with Maud Gonne at the age of twenty three, that transformed Yeats into a great love poet. He fell instantly in love with her, his devotion was passionate and life-long, and henceforth Maud Gonne is everywhere in his poetry. Many poets have boasted that they will immortalise the beauty of the woman they loved, but few have succeeded as Yeats has succeeded in immortalising the classical beauty and majestic form of his beloved. The dark mistress of Shakespeare, and Sidney's beloved, despite their passionate love, remain mere shadows in their sonnets. A painter could have told us better and much more about them. "But if every painting of Maud Gonne vanished, something of her would remain credible in Yeats'

verses" (*Stock*). He painted her as words can dynamically, seeing her body as but an expression of the soul, as in the following,

*With Beauty like a tightened bow, a kind*
*That is not natural in an age like this,*
*Being high and solitary and most stern.*

or in the following :

*Tall and noble but with face and bosom*
*Delicate in colour as apple blossom.*

Maud Gonne is everywhere in the verses of *The Rose*, 1893, and *the Wind among The Reeds*, 1819. Much of the love poetry in these volumes is impersonal and symbolic. The poet does not express his love personally, but dramatically through such symbols as Michael Robertes, Hanrahan, Aedh, etc, but we feel that the poignancy and ecstasy of these lyrics have personal significance. It is the poet who speaks through his characters, and Maud Gonne's face is everywhere. The lyrics are a glowing, passionate tribute of a lover to his mistress :

*But I, being poor, have only my dreams,*
*I have spread my dreams under your feet,*
*Tread softly because you tread on my dreams,*

The ecstasy of personal love inspires the following :—

*You need but lift a pearl-pale hand*
*And bind up your long hair and sigh,*
*And all men's hearts must burn and beat.*

Sometimes, the mood is one of restlessness resulting from the poet's awareness of the ugliness of reality intruding upon his image of his beloved. All things, "*uncomely and broken*," *Are wronging your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart*." Such love-lyrics must be ranked with the greatest love-poetry of the 20th century. Yeats brings his vision of her to everything he touches. He may

write of Cathaleen or of the stage and the players, but every woman tends to take the shape of Maud Gonne.

His passion for Maud Gonne was violent, and it was the frustration of this violent passion that transformed Yeats into one of the greatest love poets of the modern age. *Stauffer* in his *The Golden Nightingale* goes to the extent of claiming that with the possible exception of Donne, Yeats is the greatest love-poet in the English language, one in comparison with whom all others look pale and bloodless. His expression of love in his later poetry is straightforward and poignant. The love-lyrics written after 1903, the year in which Maud Gonne married Major Macbride, have two chief features (1) They express the poet's bitter-disillusionment and (2) They are characterised by a complexity of moods and tones. The poet is heart-broken and sometimes his frustration is expressed in an indignant outburst,

*Pardon that for a barren passions-sake,*
*Although I have come close on forty-nine*
*I have no child, I have nothing but a book,*
*Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine,*

Elsewhere, the expression is more self-controlled, and the very restraint increases the intensity of the lyric :

*Sweet heart, do not love too long*
*I loved long and long,*
*And grew to be out of fashion*
*Like an old song.*

or, as in the following :

*Never give all thy heart, for love*
*Will barely seen worth thinking of*
*To passionate women, if it seem certain.*

The mood is one of impatience and indignation in *Adam's Curse* written on the eve of Maud Gonne's marriage, and

reflects the poet's consciousness of impending doom. At other times, unrequited love causes resignation and the poet asks, "*Why should I blame her that she has filled my days with misery?*" The complexity of moods, and the shifts in tone which characterise Yeat's later love-lyrics are an indication of his mastery over his craft and of the depth and intensity of his feeling. The poet could not forget Maud Gonne upto the very end of his days, and her face keeps peeping out of his poetry in one guise or the other. Thus even in as late a lyric as *Among School Children* she sets him dreaming of the past. While in *A Bronze Head* some mysterious, supernatural power is attributed to her, Helen and Dierdre are the ever-recurring symbols of her destructive beauty.

**Yeats' Achievement—Enlarged Scope of the Lyric**

What is Yeats' achievement as a lyricist? For one thing, he has enlarged the scope of the lyric by enclosing vast immensities within little space. Thus in *No Second Troy*, a short lyric, through the use of Helen-Dierdre-Maud Gonne image the past, the present, and the future, are fused together, and the impression created is one of simultaneous compression and expansion, with a corresponding increase in intensity. Similar is the case with *Leda and the Swan*.

**Imparted Metrical Variety**

Secondly, according to *W. H. Auden*, Yeats released the English lyric from the tyranny and monotony of *the Iambic*. We find him experimenting in different metres and stanza-patterns. Specially, he displays considerable skill in the use of the long verse-line, and in the manipulation of *pauses* in such lines. At other times, he shows a Donne-like originality and skill in the stanziac-structure of his lyrics : thought and emotion determine the structure of the first-stanza, and the subsequent stanzas are determined by the first. Indeed, Yeats has a tremendous range of gaits.

**The Music of His Lyrics**

Thirdly, Yeats may not actually sing, but when at his

best, his lyrics have the lilt of a song. Musical speech accompanied by a stringed instrument, had been one of his pre-occupations from early days, and this sharpened his ear to stress and cadence. And that is why he can give to his lyrics, as few poets can, their individual singing note. His ears could tell him how to vitalize his rhythms by natural stress and pause, and he writes lines after lines which may be called "heightened speech." His later lyrics have the authentic ring, vitality and movement of actual speech. At other times, the lightness of song results from assurance as in the *Crazy-Jane* group of lyrics and in those grouped under, "*Words for Music Perhaps*". As *Stock* puts it, "The lightness of song comes not so much from simplicity as from a kind of assurance, when the tongue finds speech for what is believed in the bones, whether or not it echoes a common faith". This assurance distinguishes Yeats from nearly all his contemporaries ; as he aged his thought grew lonelier and more recondite, but his power of song increased. The lyric tune is not imposed from outside, but grows from the words themselves. Often he sings light-heartedly from this assurance as well as from his zest for life which he retained upto the end of life. Passionate excitement characterises even the lyrics of his last phase. Yeats is a unique phenomenon, in more ways than one, among English poets.

# 16

## *Mystic Note in Yeats' Poetry*

### Mysticism : Defined and Explained

Mysticism is a temper, a mood, rather than a doctrine or a systematic philosophy of life. A mystic has apprehensions of divine reality behind and within the ordinary world of sense perception. However, he cannot convey his apprehension in a reasoned logical manner. That is why the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines a mystic as one, "who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths beyond the understanding," and mystical poetry is devoted to the revelation of truth outside the domain of sense and reason. In other words, mysticism is a matter of experience, of faith, of intuition, rather than of reason. Moreover, the mystic is not only conscious of a divine presence in nature, he also feels that there is essential identity of being between Man, Nature, and God. This faith in "the oneness of all" is the key-note of mysticism. However, since mysticism, by its very nature, is incapable of rational exposition, the term is loosely used for all that is obscure and inexplicable. Another important aspect of mysticism is a faith in the immortality of the soul. The body may die, but the soul lives on as part of the eternal. This is the basic faith of Plato and the Platonists.

### In Chief Features

The chief characteristics of mysticism may be summarised as :

(1) It is an apprehension of divine presence in nature.

(2) It is a consciousness of the essential "oneness of all".

(3) It is a matter of faith. It is irrational and cannot be conveyed logically.

(4) It is a belief in the immortality of the human soul.

(5) A mystic has 'experiences' and 'visions', and he is convinced of their reality.

(6) The word is also used loosely for what is obscure or inexplicable.

**Yeats and Indian Mysticism**

Mystic note runs through Yeats' poetry from the beginning to the end of his career. As someone has pertinently remarked the world of Yeats' poetry is the world, "of a mystic visionary in which the gods and fairies of celtic mythology live again." He was convinced of the realities of the fairies and other supernatural beings, and regarded them as essential links in the chain of being. As for the Indian visionary, so also for Yeats, every mountain and valley every stone and coppice, is hallowed with the memory of the past and is the haunt of the supernatural. His early work includes three poems on Indian themes, and the Indian landscapes of these poems are alive, with the life of one spirit enveloping the universe," and this faith remained an integral part of his poetry upto the very end. This conviction is voiced forcefully and clearly in the *Indian upon God* :

> *I passed a little further on, and heard a peacock say,*
> *"who made the grass and made the worms and made my feathers gay,*
> *He is a monstrous peacock, and he waveth all the night*
> *His languid tail above us, lit with myriad spots of light."*

This very mystic note is also struck in another poem written towards the close of the poet's career,

*I proclaim that there is*
*Among birds or beats or men,*
*One that is perfect or at peace*

... ... ... ...

... ... ... ...

*All that could run or leap or swim*
*Whether in wood, water and cloud,*
*Acclaiming, proclaiming, declaiming Him.*

Yeats' mind and temper had an affinity with many things that he found in Indian philosophy, and Indian thought served to give clarity and form to his own convictions. He had the temper of a true mystic, and this accounts for his keen interest in the teaching of *the Indian Upnishads*, *Indian Vedantic Philosophy*, and the poetry of *Tagore* and *Blake*.

**Yeats' System : Irrational and Inexplicable**

Quite early in life Yeats had lost faith in Christianity as well as in Victorian science. He had his own convictions, but he searched for a pattern or a system which may give form and coherence to his beliefs. This led him to magic, to astronomy, to Theosophy, to Plato and Plotinus, and to other occult studies. At last he succeeded in formulating a '*system*' of his own which has been elaborated at great lengths in *the Vision*. This system of Yeats is a curious mixture of philosophy, mythology, magic and expository symbolism. His theory of the cyclic process of history, the revolution of gyres, the correspondence between the phases of the Moon and the phases of human personality, his concept of *Anima Mundi* aud *Spiritus Mundi* etc., are essentially mystical in nature. By their very nature they are incapable of rational exposition. The entire system is a matter of faith, and consequently, despite his best efforts, Yeats has failed to make it explicable to

his readers. *Edmund Wilson* calls it, "an elaborate mystical-metaphysical system", and dismisses it as obscure and unintelligible.

**Mystic Visions and Trances : Symbolism**

Like a mystic, Yeats, too was subject to visions and trances. He had experiences. He sought to convey his visions and experiences to his readers, and as the resources of the ordinary language were insufficient for him, he made use of an elaborate system of symbols. Now as *C.M. Bowra* points out symbolism is fundamentally mystical in nature. A mystic seeks to convey his supernatural experiences and visions, and for this purpose makes use of symbols. Yeats, too, uses symbols to convey his visions and experiences which by their very nature are incommunicable. A number of poems deals with his spiritualistic experiences and visions. Thus in *All Soul's Night* the theme is a *seance*, the calling up of departed spirits ; in the *Double Vision of Michael Robertes*, he gives us two visions of great importance, and in *the Second Coming* the vision is prophetic giving us a moment of insight into a formidable future. In *Sailing to Byzantium* he imagines an intellectual solitude, in which he would find a mystics, joy. The experience embodied in the following passage is essentially mystical in nature :

*So great a sweetness flows into the breast,*
*We must laugh and we must sing,*
*We are blest by everything,*
*Everything we look upon is blest,*

**Yeats and the True Mystic : Points of Difference**

Yeats' poetry has the obscurity and intricacy which characterise the works of all mystics. He is a mystic in more senses than one. However, he differs from a true mystic in a number of important respects. For one thing his belief in magic and the supernatural tempers, modifies his mysticism. A true mystic believes in one Spirit or Mind at work in Nature shaping all objects and phenomena.

Yeats mixes up this faith in the "oneness of all" with belief in the fairy-world, and the host of spirits, demons, etc., which can be conjured up by the use of magical symbols. Secondly, mysticism is characterised by a rejection of life and its pleasures Mysticism is other-worldly and emphasises aesceticism and a negation of life. Lust for life, on the other hand, is the key-note of Yeats' poetry. In *the Dialogue of Self and Soul* life is passionately and unflinchingly accepted. Even in old age he is eager to enjoy life and praise for an, "old man's frenzy, and longs to be a, "foolish, passionate old man." In *the Politics*, a poem of the last phase, he tells us that he cannot concentrate on Roman, Russian or Spanish politics, with, "that girl standing there", and desires,

*But O that I were young again,*
*And held her in my arms.*

The longing will do credit to a rake rather than to a mystic. Thirdly as *David Daiches* puts it all his life Yeats searched for a pattern, while a mystic tries to shatter all patterns. "He seeks to impose order, not, as the true mystic does, to break down a too neatly ordered system and get beyond it ....He turns to mysticism not in search of shattering new insights but in quest of categories, often maintaining a casual scepticism concerning what to the mystics themselves were the essential truths". (*David Daiches*).

# 17

## *W. B. Yeats : Obscurity ; Its Causes*

### Causes of Obscurity in Poetry

Various factors may result in obscurity in the works of a poet. He may be careless in matters of language and diction, or his mind may move faster than his pen, and he may write a, "telegraphic style", like Browning. In other cases, obscurity may result from the profundity of thought, from psyeho-analysis or from the use of a recondite and far-fetched imagery. The diction may be heavily over-loaded with the poet's learning or, as in the case of Donne and other Metaphysicals, his mind may move with great agility from one dissimilar concept to another and the readers may not be able to keep pace with him. The use of complex, personal symbols, to render inner sensations or mystic thought, is a fruitful source of obscurantism, specially in modern poetry.

### Yeats : No Carelessness in Style

It is now generally recognised that Yeats is a difficult, and at places even an obscure poet. However, in his case obscurity does not arise from carelessness. He was a conscious artist who revised and re-revised what he wrote, and in this way tried to say what he had to say in the best possible way. Obscurity in his poetry does not result from vagueness or indistinctness of language or diction nor does his poetry suffer from a telegraphic style. But there are

a number of other factors which taken together account for the difficulty and obscurity which his readers have to face.

**The Irish Background : Use of a New Mythology**

For one thing, Yeats' poetry is rooted in the Irish tradition and he makes ample use of Irish mythology, legends and historical and geographical land-marks of the country. His readers have been familiar with classical and Biblical mythology and medieval tales of magic and witchcraft, and Yeats' use of this Irish and Gaelic mythology and legend is new and unfamiliar for them. It, no doubt, carries with it the charm of novelty, but it has also increased the difficulty of his poetry. The Druids, the Sidhe and the Daanan children from mythology, personages like *Cuchalian*, *Osin Diedre*, *Usna's* children, from Irish legends, Geographical features like *Knocknarea*, *Drumahair*, etc., figures from Irish folk-lore *King Goll*, *Moll*, *Magie*, which appear and re-appear in Yeats' poetry at every turn of the road, confuse and bewilder the readers. The reader must come to his poetry with some knowledge of these Irish features. As most readers lack it, they denounce him as obscure and unreadable. The deficiency lies with the reader and not with the poet.

**Density and Profundity**

Secondly, as we have noted above, Yeats frequently revised and re-revised his writing, and the revision was always in favour of simplicity and austerity. All verbiage and superfluity was dropped out and utmost economy of means was practised. The result was his style has acquired an epigrammatic terseness and condensation, almost *Dantesque*. This density of expression cannot but create difficulties for the uninitiated reader. *Stock* rightly points out that, "Yeats' style is stripped. and utterly dependent on the intense life of his mind. When he is difficult it is because of the thought ; and the thought is not confused, but too well-knit and too remote from most people's preconceptions to be followed easily." Thus in

the *Supernatural Songs* when Ribh declares that, "out of nothing comes everything," most readers fail to understand the implications of Yeats' metaphysics and accuse him of being enigmatic at the cost of becoming abscure.

**Bringing together of opposites**

Yeats' poetry, as *Stock* put it, is a battle-ground for the clash of opposites. He is never tired of rendering the antimonies of life. Often whole ages are telescoped within the scope of a brief lyric. Thus in *No Second Troy*, through the use of Helen-Dierde-Maud Gonne image, the past, present and the future are enclosed within a short span. His mind move with great swiftness from one dissimilar concept to another, and the past and the present, the near and the distant, the spiritual and the physical, the temporal and the eternal, the body and the soul, the sensuous and the intellectual, are all juxtaposed. The average reader lacks this mental, agility, fails to keep pace with the poet, and so understands him only after repeated and laborious readings.

**Use of Complex Symbols**

Yeats was a symbolist from the beginning to the end. In his earlier poetry, his symbolism is elementary and traditional and presents no difficulties for his readers, but in his later poetry his symbolism is personal and highly complex. Thus the swan, the tower, and the winding stair are all personal symbols invented by the poet to express his individual concepts, and more often than not his own 'inner sensations'. Moreover, the same symbol is used in different poems in different senses. His symbols are rich in emotive and evocative value. His images often have a processional quality. Not only do they follow each other in rows, but also one image gives rise to a host of others. Often he thinks naturally in symbols and manipulates them to convey swift transitions and intricate connections of thought. Obviously, such complex, symbolic poetry needs some straining and effort on the part of the readers.

**Yeats' System : Mysticism**

Quite early in his life Yeats had lost faith in tradi-

tional concepts and beliefs, and he searched for a system or pattern which may give coherence and unity and to his thoughts. This search led him to the study of magic, theology, astrology, the philosophy of Plato and Plotinus and other occult studies. At last he developed a *system* of his own, which is a curious mixture of philosophy, mythology, magic and mysticism. Allusions to this system are frequent in his poetry, and though, on the whole, his poetry can be understood without reference to his system, there are certain poems for which a knowledge of this system is essential. In addition to this, symbols of magic mingle freely with his poetic symbols and make the matters worse confounded. Sometimes, his thought is too new and strange for ready acceptance and startles and bewilders most readers. A vein of mysticism runs through Yeats' poetry and mysticism by its very nature is irrational and inexplicable. Thus his theory of the cyclic process of history is basic to *the Second Coming*, and *the Statues* remains unintelligible without a knowledge of both Eastern and Western mythologies and folk-lore.

**Use of Speech-Syntax**

Often an Yeats' sentence is spoken thought, developing as it moves. It differs from the conversational language only by the absence of every un-necessary world, detail or superfluity. "But a spoken sentence is expressed in time, not space" (*Stock*). A speaker can lengthen his pauses, intensify his stresses, and convey much more through gestures than can be expressed by mere words. A speaker can often omit verble links, or leave out pronouns. But in writing, the speech is translated from the eye to the ear, and sentences flow differently, and words must follow a different order and syntax. A writer, who tries to imitate speech-syntax in his writing, rans the risk of being considered obscure and unintelligiable as he does not enjoy the advantage of the free manipulation of pause, stress and gesture of spoken language. "Sometimes his obscurities arise from this : a meaning ambiguous on paper can be cleared up, when the movement of thought ts understood as a whole, by an inflection of the voice" (*Stock*).

**Conclusion**

To sum up : Yeats is difficult for most people partly because of his condensed language—usually simple in vocabulary but packed with meaning—partly because of his abrupt transitions as in excited talk with friends, but chiefly because of the sheer concentration into his phrases of years of passionate and lonely thought, thought often most unusual, strange, and novel. However, all his poems become clearer as one looks closer and closer at them, and each subsequent poem throws light on the previous ones. Yeats may be obscure at places but his is that type of obscurity, "which enriches a poem rather than impoverishes it by giving suggestions of depth that cannot be produced in any other way" (*David Daiches*).

# 18

## *Metaphysical Note in Yeats' Poetry*

### The Metaphysical Tradition : Yeats' Interest

One of the most important movements in the history of 20th century English poetry is the revival of interest in the Metaphysical poetry of the 17th century. The interest was stimulated and accentuated by the appearance of *Grierson's* admirable edition of Donne's poems in 1912. As *David Daiches* points out, the great Metaphysical poets were now esteemed once again for their toughness and complexity, their fusion of thought and passion. Their poetic and stylistic techniques—the use of pun and paradox, irony, wit and humour, their vein of realism and cynicism, their use of harsh colloquial diction and rhythms, their concern with ambivalence of experience—were revived and imitated. Yeats, too, was profoundly interested in this revival of the metaphysical tradition, read Grierson's edition with interest, and in one of his poems remarks :

*And I may dine at Journey's end*
*With Landor and with Donne.*

### The Antimonies of Life : Rendering and Reconciliation

There are many features of the Metaphysical school which harmonised well with his own natural bent. The metaphysical poets delighted in bringing together the

opposites of life. Their minds moved with great agility from one dissimilar concept to another and in this way the antimonies of life were juxtaposed. Yeats, too, in his poetry is constantly bringing together the opposites of life. The 'ambivalence' within his own personality attracted him naturally to ambivalence in life. Such opposites as the human and the non-human, age and youth, physical decay and intellectual maturity, the temporal and the eternal, the spiritual and the sensuous, the past and the present, are not only rendered but also, specially in his later poetry, there is ever an attempt to reconcile them.

**The Intellectual Tone of His Poetry**

This attempt to harmonise the antimonies of life gives to his later poetry a hard intellectual tone associated with the poetry of Donne. There is a cold, detached, intellectual analysis of emotion, and in this way results that fusion of emotion and intellect, of thought and feeling, for which *T. S. Eliot* has praised metaphysical poetry so very highly. This intellectual element predominates in his later poetry, and even myths are increasingly used metaphysically, as in "*The Phases of the Moon*". "A passage like the following," says *David Daiches*, "shows an intellectual play deriving from a handling on several different levels of a thought-pattern based on an esoteric myth :"

> *Were not our beds far off, I would ring the bell,*
> *Stand under the rough roof-timbers of the hall*
> *Beside the castle door, where all is*
> *Dark austerity...........*

**Unification of Sensibility**

In 1906, Yeats wrote that a poet should carry into his poetry, "The normal, passionate, reasoning self, the personality as a whole." Henceforward, he tried to express his personality as a whole which is both intellect and passion. This unification of sensibility is the characteristic feature of Donne's poetry, as it is also that of Yeats. In *No Second Troy*, high passion is combined with a cold,

hard intellectual exposition, and in this way, the past, present and the future are telescoped together. Even ancient myths and legends are intellectually used and new myths are constantly invented to serve the purposes of the intellect. *The Cold Heaven* and *the Magi* are other examples of this metaphysical unification of sensibility, and the resulting gain in intensity needs no comment.

**Metaphysical Thought-Content**

Yeats considered dichotomy as the very centre of experience, and his attempts at resolving it led him to the foundation of his curious "*System*" which is a strange mixture of metaphysics, magic and mythology. In the *Sailing to Byzantium* he tries to reconcile the opposites of age and youth, of the eternal and the temporal, of the artistic and the sensual, with reference to the metaphysical philosophy of Plotinus. Like Plotinus, he takes an extra-temporal point of view and conceives of a country outside time. Byzantium transcends space and time. "The two Byzantium poems distil their meaning into a quintessence, haunting the mind and probing the emotions, as no English poet had done since the 17th century." Even the early Yeats had been concerned with the problems of the flesh and the spirit, of life and death, and with the passing of time his thought became more and more metaphysical.

**Donne-like Obscurity**

The metaphysical thought-content accounts for much of the power and complexity as well as obscurity of Yeats' later poetry. Thus in the *Supernatural Songs* he presents his metaphysics through the person of the aged Ribh. The thought is often startling and new and beyond the comprehension of the average reader. Thus when Ribh announces that "out of nothing comes everything", Yeats, like Donne, becomes enigmatic at the cost of becoming obscure. His use of symbols, like the winding stair, the spinning gyres, the dancer and the dance both inseparable from each other, and the mixing up of poetic and magical symbols, further increase the Donne-like obscurity of his poetry. Matters are made worse by his *Dantesque* ter-

seness and concentration, another important aspect of the 17th century metaphysicals. Like Donne, he has enlarged the scope of the lyric and in lyrics like *Leda and the Swan*, *The Cold Heaven*, *the Magi* etc..—lyrics characterised by extreme of condensation—he has succeeded in enclosing vast immensities within little space.

**Use of Metaphysical Stylistic Devices**

Not only does Yeats have the epigrammatic terseness, force and intensity of metaphysical poetry, he also makes use of a number of other metaphysical poetic and stylistic devices. His use of speech-rhythms and colloquial diction, his choice of harsh, choppy words to convey his sense of the harshness of reality, often the bitterly cynical and ironical tone of his poetry, all show his close affinities with Donne and his school. Like them he loves hyperboles, and often expresses himself in a forthright, hyperbolic manner. These metaphysical devices are used even as early as the *Adam's Curse*—characterised by stark realism and prosaic rhythms—and are the characteristic features of his latter poetry. Thus in the *Fascination of What is Difficult* we have,

*My curse on plays*
*That have to be set up in fifty ways,*
*On the day's war with every knave and dolt*
*Theatre business, management of men......*

The following lines have a coarse brutality, almost Donne-like,

*A woman can be proud and stiff*
*When on love intent ;*
*But Love has pitched his mansion in*
*The place of excrement :*
*For nothing can be sole or whole*
*That has not been rent.*

**Complexity of Tones and Moods**

Another poetic device which he uses in common with Donne is the use of sudden tonal shifts within the same poem, and sometimes even in the same line. Thus in the third line of that admirable poem *The Shade*, the tone is at once ironic and elegiac :

*If you have revisited the town shade*
*Whether to took upon your monument*
*(I wonder, if the builder has been paid).*

There is gradual tonal shift in *the Elegy* from contempt to epic anger. Complexity of moods and tones, and rich variety of responses to the same situation characterise Yeats' poetry.

**Metrical Experiments**

Like Donne, Yeats, too, experimented with a number of metrical forms with great success. He showed great mastery in the handling of the octosyllabic line and showed its conversational possibilities, freed the English lyric from the tyranny of the Iambic, and used the long line with consummate skill. Indeed, the various stanza-forms handed down to us from Chaucer through Spenser have been used by Yeats with perfect mastery. Many of his finest lyrics are cast in long, irregular stanzas. "Like the poetry of Donne, the poetry of Yeats also displays an increase of freedom in the handling of rhythms combined with a growing originality and variety in stanza-forms" (*David Daiches*). He often follows just the procedure followed in so many of the poems of John Donne : "The poem opens with an outburst of passionate thought which carves its own channel and the rest of the poem keeps to the form thus carved out." Thus he thought and emotion determine the pattern of the first stanza and the first stanza in its turn determines the structure of the subsequent stanzas.

**His Originality : Points of Difference**

Thus, the metaphysical vein runs through Yeats' poetry and he has close affinity with the poets of the school of

Donne. He has the same richness, complexity, intricacy and density, and often he shocks and startles in the same manner. But he was a highly original genius, and so has marked peculiarities of his own. We do not find in him any of the fantastic metaphysical conceits and war-fetched imagery. *Stock* emphasises the individuality of Yeats when he says that both Donne and Yeats shared the need to find spiritual reality embodied in the senses. "But Donne, beginning as a profligate, made sure of the senses first and than found through sex a reassurance of something beyond them. Yeats began from ascetic idealism, absolute certainty of spirit, and a love-poetry that is almost disembodied and learnt in later manhood to understand with his senses how spirit becomes incarnate in sex." By the time of the *Crazy-Jane Group* of poems he is able to sing of his profoundest metaphysical philosophy in snatches of light-hearted song, a mastery and an assimilation which Donne failed to acquire, and which is the touchstone of the highest genius.

# 19

## *The Art & Technique of W. B. Yeats Or Yeats' Diction & Versification*

### Yeats' Artistic Methods

*Norman Jeffares* in his admirable study of Yeats, remarks that the poet, in common with most other poems, had two main methods of poetic creation : One spontaneous and the other a laborious process involving much alteration and substitution. However, it was only in his early period that he relied entirely on the magic of inspiration and gave himself up to, "the chief temptation of the artist, creation without toil." More characteristic of Yeats, is the second method emphasised by Jeffares, a method requiring constant labour, constant modifications and excisions. He was a conscious artist who polished and re-polished his verse and tried to say, what he had to say, in the best possible words. The following lines from *the Adam's Curse* throw valuable side-light on his artistic method :

*I said, "A line will take us hours may be,*
*Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought*
*Our stitching and unstitching has been naught."*

### His Artistic Sincerity

Poetry might have come to him as, "naturally as leaves to a tree," but it certainly did not come easily. In a letter

to *Robert Bridges*, Yeats writes, "When I wrote verse, five or six lines in two or three hours were a day's work." Thus he composed slowly and painstakingly, showing his sincerity as an artist. The various letters, diaries unpublished manuscripts, in the possession of Mrs. Yeats and now made available to scholars like *Ellmann*, *Jeffares* and *Prof. Salt* and incorporated in the *Variorum Edition* of his *Collected Poems*, show the many and radical changes that his poems under-went before publication. Very many of his poems were first planned in prose drafts which were then cast in poetic form. The first poetic draft itself underwent successive re-writings and revisions till all that was faulty in metre and rhyme was eschewed and formal perfection achieved. Often he would chant a poem aloud to find the right world which would convey his meaning as well as fit into the sound effect which he desired to create. That is why his poems gain in intensity and clarify if they are read aloud, as the poet intended them to be. Thus he was a sincere, painstaking artist who took great care both of the meaning and the sound of his words and by this painful deliberation achieved a force of impact, "That is unapproached by any writer of the 20th century"

**His "Two Styles"**

Not only did Yeats carefully plan out his poems in prose drafts and also prepare successive versions in verse before publication, he also continued to revise them even after publication all through his career and introduced substantial alterations both in vocabulary and syntax. This is so much the case that *Richard Ellmann* speaks of the "*Two styles of Yeats*", the styles of his early and later poetry. He was constantly re-making himself, and his revisions are not merely stylistic variations, but also a renewal showing a corresponding change in his attitude towards life :

*The friends that have it I do wrong*
*Whenever I remake a song,*
*Should know what issue is at stake :*
*It is myself that I re-make*

**The Early Style**

Yeats' early poetry is in the thinned out romantic tradition of the 19th century, and his style is in harmony with the dream atmosphere of this early world of magic and enchantment. The diction is easy and languid, over-weighted with clotty metaphors and epithets and poetic, dainty-footed words in the Pre-Raphaelite tradition. It is highly coloured, but the colours are pale, shadowy and misty, in keeping with the wistful, nostalgic tone. There is profuse use of imagery, and decorative word-pictures. As one critic puts it, his early poetry, "is over-hung with Pre-Raphaelite tapestry." It speaks with, "a sweet, mellifluous, feminine voice." The poet is of the opinion that, "words alone are certain good," and is swept off his feet by their lure.

**The Latter Style—Syntax**

However, Yeats soon grew dissatisfied with this early style, and the early poems under-went revisions and modifications both in their syntax and vocabulary reflecting his changed attitude towards life. The revisions indicate an increasing concern to bring his poetry nearer to life and to give to it naturalness and realism. The change is seen as early as *Adam's Curse*, 1902, and, it grows more and more marked with the passing of time. The poet is moving in the direction of common speech and is never tired of repeating his formula that a poet must use, "natural words in the natural order," and that a poet must make efforts, "to bring his language nearer to everyday speech." Poetic inversions are removed, and there is a distinct gain in precision and directness. The poet aims at the syntax of common speech, and in the later phase many of his lines are simply prose written in verse form. Thus the true spirit of prose marks the line, "*Go watch the road between the wood and the tide*," though the effective quality of poetry has been retained. He aimed at "natural momentum in the syntax," and gained it in his later poetry.

**The Later Vocabulary—Simplicity**

In the matter of vocabulary also there is ever an attempt to approximate to common speech. All archaisms and poe-

ticisms are gradually shed and the words acquire harder a texture. His images grow more definite and precise, acquire a new solidity and firmness. The colouring grows more brilliant and garish, and there is a growing tendency to use harsh and choppy words reflecting the (bitterness) and disillusionment of the poet. Prosaic words with a harsh, jarring sound like "couching," "ragged", 'narrow' etc., are used to convey the harshness of reality. *Edmund Wilson* rightly points out that now, "the soap-bubble colours vanish," and his verse grows severe, definite, precise and harsh. All verbiage and superfluity is rigidly excluded with a corresponding gain in vigour and intensity. His diction acquires an almost Dantesque terseness and epigrammatic force. Density is the peculiar feature of Yeats' later poetry. His revisions show that, "Often whole lines are clipped, and a cryptic, simpler but more effective line is substituted." As the poet tell us in *The Coat*, he has given up old mythological embroideries, and prefers to walk naked. But this barrenness as nakedness of diction does not result in any loss of effect, as *C.M. Bowra* and some other scholars seem to imply ; rather, it now imparts to his poetry a rare masculine vigour and intensity. His diction is sinewy and muscular, though unadorned and plain. The structure grows bony and skeleton-like, with a corresponding gain in richness and complexity.

## Skill as a Metrical Artist

Another important aspect of Yeats' art is his consummate skill as a metrical artist. He was a great experimenter in verse-forms and stanza-patterns. He experimented with a variety of metres and stanza-forms which have been received by us from Chaucer through Spenser. *Stock* emphasises his skill in this respect and writes, "No modern poet has so mastered traditional stanza-forms of the kind that Chaucer handed down through Spenser to the Romantics : perhaps none of any time has written stanzas at once so rich in music and so compact in thought and phrase." He freed the English lyric from the tyranny of the Iambic, used the long line with great effect, and with consummate

skill showed the full conversational possibilities of the octosyllabic couplet. He is equally skilful in manipulating the irregular-stanza. Often his stanzas follow a Donne-like pattern. The thought and emotion, control the structure of the first stanza, and the subsequent stanzas follow the pattern laid down in the first. In the manipulation of pause, stress and cadence few can rival Yeats. However, it must be acknowledged that despite his mastery over traditional metres, Yeats keeps away from the modern *verse libre* and other verse-experiments. He fails to capture the rhythm of modern life.

**The Singing Note**

Few modern poets can sing as Yeats does ; his lyrics have an individual singing note. They are not actual songs, but there is a lilt in the words ; they sing or chant themselves from sheer rightness of sound. "Musical speech, accompanied by a stringed instrument had been one of his pre-occupations since early days" and this accounts for his keen ear for stress and cadence. The musical note in his verse is in no way imposed, it grows naturally from the words themselves. Words are carefully chosen both with reference to their sense and their sound, melodious words are given their full value, and the riches of the languages are fully exploited. In a passage like the following,

*Though now it seems,*
*As if some marvellous empty sea-shelly flung*
*Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams,*
*And not a fountain, were the symbol which*
*Shadows the inherited glory of the rich.*

"musical resonance and the turning of sensations into sounds have become a sort of conjuring-trick : he is performing rather than speaking. An Yeats' sentence is spoken thought developing as it moves" (*Stock*). When at his best, the lightness of song results not so much from simplicity as from assurance, when the tongue finds speech for

what is believed in the bones. Thus in the *Words for Music Perhaps*, Crazy-Jane sings of his profoundest metaphysical vision with all the lightness of a song.

**His Rhythms**

As a metrical artist, Yeats has the unique ability to modulate his rhythm to harmonise with the spirit of his verse. Yeats' early verse is escapist and the atmosphere is dreamy and lanurous, and in keeping with this otherworldly atmosphere of his poetry, his rhythms, too, are half-entranced, "like a man walking alone lost in a train of visionary thought, or incantatory, as if he thought of poetry as a priestly vocation". This haunting, incantory music dulls the sense of reality, and transports the readers to fairyland. It helps to secure the suspension of disbelief which is poetic faith. But the poet soon outgrew this incantatory music and by the time of *The Wind among the Reeds* when he is writing "pure poetry," he uses, "wavering, meditative, organic rhythms" which are the embodiments of imagination. However,this phase of introspective withdrawal was a short one and the poet soon came down to earth. His contact with reality made him disillusioned and bitter, and this change is reflected in his verse-music. There is an increasing tendency to use speech rhythms, often choppy and harsh. Instead of the vague, incantatatory music of the earlier verse, we now get rhythms of almost Wordsworthian simplicity. By the time of the rich and complex *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair poetry*, Yeats is at the full height of his powers. The speech-rhythms of the middle period are still used, but in poems like *Sailing to Byzantium* an effect of rare richness is produced by relating daily speech to an incantatory pattern Emphasising this phenomenal evolution of Yeats' art, *W.H. Beach* writes that in his early poetry, "very little of common life is admitted ; the vocabulary is rather strictly limited to what would suit the general tonality of later Victorian romanticism, and further limited in the effort to give the effect of Irish folk-literature. In his later poetry, Yeats cultivates subtler, more varied and more dramatically balanced cadences : his vocabulary is greatly enlarged with

terms both vernacular and learned. The metaphors are fresher and taken from a vastly wider range of reference, and the imaginative structure is both more firmly wrought and more spontaneous and natural in effect."

**His Faults : Use of Hyperboles ; Lack of Contempreneity**

As an artist, Yeats continued to mature and grow upto the end of his days. He acquired greater confidence and assurance and handled words with perfect ease, like a master. His language became racier, his rhythms quicker, and he could rise effortlessly to grandeur and sublimity. He now no longer speaks hesitantly or timidly but asserts his faith defiantly, even arrogantly. His absolute artistic integrity and sincerity compel him to express himself in a downright, trenchent manner, without any reservation or concealment. Self-assurance accounts for his tendency to indulge in hyperboles and exaggeration, a tendency which has been regarded as a serious fault of his style by a number of critics. Thus there is a tendency in Yeats' later poetry to overwork such hyperbolic words as, "*passionate*," '*rage*', '*turbulent*', '*frenzy*', '*murderous*', '*blood and mire*' etc., and this hyperbolism soon appears wearisome and hollow, and leads the poet into, "tremendous, nonsensical asservations". *D. S. Savage*, criticising Yeats' weakness for hyperbole, writes, "This exaggeration and over-heightening, this indulgence in dramatics, is exemplified in the repeated use of hyperbolic phrases and of resounding words whose effect is to inflate the meaning." Another failure of Yeats as an artist is that he rarely chooses his words, phrases, idioms, metaphors and images from the contemporary scene.

**Conclusion**

These are certainly serious faults, but they in no way detract from his true greatness as an artist. He wrote from inner compulsion as a true artist should, and it is this unusual urgency of spirit that gives to his poetry, "its peculiar inner, glow, as of inspiration, and classes it among our poetical monuments, if not precisely among, 'monuments of unaging intellect."

20

# *A General Estimate of Yeats as a Poet*

1. *The Greatness of Yeats.*
2. *Chief Features of His Poetry.*
3. *His Limitations and Shortcomings.*

**Yeats' Greatness : Opinion of Critics**

The greatness of Yeats as a poet is now an accepted fact. Tributes to his greatness have been paid from time to time by eminent poets and critics of the day. Thus *J. W. Beach* calls him the finest of the British poets of the modern age, and *Edith Stiwell* admiring his poetry writes, "It is forty-years since the earliest of these great poems gave new life to the language, and today they spring into our consciousness anew, as if we heard them for the first time : and the wonders and splendour of the latest poems are even greater, since they have grown from a deeper wisdom, a more universal experiment." *Frazer* in his well known book *The Modern Writer and His World* claims for Yeats the position of a major English poet, and ranks him with Donne, with Milton, and with Wordsworth and considers him very much superior to Browning, to Tennyson and to Arnold. Further, he claims that the poetry of Yeats would enjoy a greater permanence and a more enduring popularity than the poetry either of T. S. Eliot or of Ezra

Pound, because it is more coherent and more traditional than that of his two great contemporaries. He is largely free from the freaks and whims, the eccentricities and incoherent ramblings, which characterise much contemporary poetry.

**His Poetry : Bulk, Variety and Uniformity**

Thus Yeats is a great poet, but what is the secret of his greatness ? What are leading qualities of his poetry, which make him tower head and shoulders above his contemporaries ? For one thing, Yeats is great by virtue of the bulk and variety of his poetry, and critics are agreed that very few of his poems can be regarded as definitely inferior. His work is uniformly good even though he writes on such varied subjects as, ancient legend, mythology, folk-lore, politics, history, love, and constantly makes new myths of his own. His creative range is immense, he writes with perfect ease and mastery on themes taken from every possible sphere of life and a high standard of performance is maintained throughout.

**Its Sustained Evolution and Organic Unity**

*T. S. Eliot* paying a tribute to Yeats in *The Criterion*, July 1935, said, "But it must be apparent that Mr. Yeats has been and is the greatest poet of his time. I can think of no poet, not even among the greatest, who has shown a longer period of development than Yeats. The learned critic regards it as a sign of genius. Indeed, this sustained and continuous development of art and genius in the key-note of Yeats' poetry. The period of poetic activity in his case extended over fifty years, and during this period he was constantly becoming, maturing and growing different from what he was in the beginning. There is no sudden change or break in continuity, but a slow evolution, and the germs of the future are to be found in what has gone before. The seeds that are sown in the earliest phase come to a gradual flowering in his later poetry. Moreover, *the Colle ted Poems* form an organic whole, each poem lights up the preceding one and is in its turn illuminated by those which follow. All obscurities vanish, if Yeats'

poetry is read as a whole, and one derives an easthetic pleasure such as one gets from few even of the greatest poets.

**Early Poetry : Escapist and Romantic**

This evolution, this gradual transistion, is one of the chief features of Yeats' poetry. His early poetry is romantic while the later one is realistic both in theme and treatment. He began writing verse in the thinned-out romantic, pre-Raphaelite tradition. His early poems are frankly escapist and are heavily over-hung with pre-Raphealite tapestry. The langurous, dreamy atmosphere of this early fairy-world is accentuated by haunting, incantatory rhythms. It is a world of celtic twilight, of vague uncertain lights, and the imagery used is equally vague and subdued in colour. The use of Irish mythology and folk-lore took all Europe by storm and it had a rare fascination for those who were fed up with the hackneyed classic myths and legends. They become aware, says *R. A. Scott-James*, of a new lyrical voice that had a fay quality, a wild tenderness, something which was wanting to their souls. It is for this reason that Yeats has been called by *Graham Hough* and others, "*the last of the great romantics*," but he became dissatisfied with this romanticism and distrusted it more and more as he aged. As he enjoyed a much longer life span than Keats and Shelley, and as his life was more complex and passionate than that of Wordsworth, and his experience, more varied he could impart a solidity and masculine virgour to his poetry which they could not.

**Later Poetry : Realism**

The turn of the century saw Yeats tranformed into a great 20th century poetry from a 19th century romantic. His later poetry is characterised by stark, naked realism, even brutality and coarseness and with a masculine vigour and forced. In keeping with modern realistic trends, there is greater and greater approximation to speech rhythms and colloquial diction. "*Natural words in a natural order*" is the ambition of the poet. All verbiage and

decoration, all superfluity is rigidly excluded and his style acquires an almost Dantesque, to use the words of *Edmund Wilson*, terseness and epigrammatic force and sublimity. However, this bareness of style and diction, this bony structure, is combined with a rare richness and complexity of content. Profundity of thought accompanies simplicity of form. The poetry of the rich and complex *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* period is a majestic utterance which stimulates and lifts up the readers by its very urgency, intensity and immediacy. The work continues to be of a uniformly high standard and there is no evidence of a decline in power even in the poems of the last phase. Such sustained evolution and uniformity of production are rare.

## The Clash of Opposites

Yeats was a boy "caught between two worlds" and the resulting ambivalence in his personality is reflected in the ambivalence of his poetry. This is so such the case that *Stock* goes to the extent of saying that his poetry is a battleground for the clash of opposites. The antimonies of the human and the non-human, of the spiritual and the physical, the sensuous and the artistic, physical decay and intellectual maturity, the past and the pesent, the personal and the impersonal, power and helplessness, are for ever appearing and reappearing in his poetry. In the early poetry, such opposites are merely rendered, but in his later poetry, according to *David Daiches*, there is also an attempt at reconciling them. Thus in the *No Second Troy*, the past and the present, the personal and the impersonal, have been fused together by the use of the Helen-Deirdre-Maud Gonne image. In *the Sailing to Byzantium* the opposition between physical decay and intellectual maturity has been resolved by taking an extra-temporal point of view. "Yeats is a supreme poet of what an earlier century would have called the passions; it is through these passions, worked upon by the organising power of poetic language, that Yeats is able to enter the centre of conflict which is man, and to re-create the conflict as the substance of poetry" (*B. Rajan*).

**Symbolism**

Yeats was a symbolist from the beginning to the end of his career so much so that *Arthur Symons* regarded him as the chief exponent of the Symbolist Movement in England. In the early phase of his career, his symbols are elementary and are no obstacles in the way of the readers. Thus a number of his early poems are organised round "*the rose*" symbol, a symbol largely traditional and so easy to understand. But with the passing of time his symbolism became more complex, personal, and individual. The swan, the tower, the winding stair, the gyres, etc., are the oft-recurring symbols of his late phase. The same symbol is used in a number of poems but in a different sense. Yeats makes use of symbols to convey his inner sensations, his visions and his mystic experiences which cannot be conveyed in any other way. At their best, Yeats' symbols are highly evocative and suggestive. They account for, to a very great extent, for the impression of exceptional complexity, richness and intensity produced by his later poetry.

**Comprehensive and Intense**

With age and experience, Yeats acquired full command over his material and could move with perfect ease from one dissimilar concept to another. He could now enclose vast immensities within the span of a short lyric, and in this way he widened the scope of the lyric. Thus in the brief *Leda and the Swan* the poet has succeeded in compressing whole ages of history, from the remote antiquity down to the present age. The effect created is one of simultaneous compression and expansion and this results in great aesthetic pleasure for the readers. In this way his lyrics gain not only in richness but also acquire the force of a personally felt emotion. The admirable and effective poem, *The Second Coming* owes its intensity to Yeats prophetic vision.

**Yeats as a Myth Maker**

*Cleanth Brooks* regards Yeats as a great myth-maker and his *Vision* as, "*the most ambitious attempt made by any*

*poet of our time to set up a myth.*" Richly gifted with a mythospoetic imagination, Yeats is for ever finding analogies for the present and the personal in the past and impersonal. In this way, the present is glorified and exalted and imparted the universal significance of a myth. The commonplace thus acquires heroic proportions. In the very opening of the Easter 1916, for example, we get the myth of Yeats' contemporaties coming out of the dead past to participate in the activity of the present. Yeats invents new myths, uses old ones in changed contexts, or invests them with new significance. Thus in *The Magi* the old Biblical story has been modified and the Magi are transformed to stars looking down at the "bestial floor." In *No Second Troy* and a lost of other poems, the old Helen-myth has been infused with unique personal significance. At other times, new myths are created by using fictious personages as symbols of personal moods and emotions.

**Mysticism : Obscurity**

The charge of obscurity has sometimes been brought against Yeats. There is no doubt a vein of mysticism running through Yeats' poetry, and mysticism by its very nature is incapable of rational exposition. It certainly creates difficulties in the way of the readers. But this obscurity and difficulty results from profundity of thought and terseness of expression rather than from any carelessness on the part of the poet. Yeats was a conscious artist who polished and repolished his verses and tried to say, what he had to say, beautifully, clearly and musically. Like a true arist, he selects his word with reference both to their sense and sound. As time went on, he increasingly tried to conform as closely as possible to everyday speech. As an artist, he had the creative gift and the inward conviction and his so-called arrogance arises from his assurance, Inspired with absolute artistic sincerity and integrity' he does not hesitate to express himself in a blunt, forthright manner. He may sometimes seem coarse and brutal, but his very brutality is an expression of his integrity of purpose.

## Yeats as a Metrical Artist

Yeats was a great metrist who experimented with a variety of stanzas and verse-forms. He kept away from the *verse libra* and other technical innovations of his day but, he used the traditional metres and stanza-forms with consummate skill. He freed the English lyric from the tyranny of the Iambic and manipulated the stress, pause and cadence of the long line with great mastery and self-confidence. The octosyllabic couplet he made particularly his own and brought out its full colloquial possibilities. He had a Donne-like command over stanza-stuctures and made his stanza patterns correspond with the movement of thought and emotion. The sudden shifts in tone and mood, often within the same line, further indicate Yeats' affinity with Donne and his school.

## No Rejection of Life

Even the greatest have their faults, and in this respect Yeats is no exception, only his faults have been over-emphasised. As we have noted above, he has been called obscure. It has also been pointed out that the tone of the poetry of *the Last Phase* is one of despair and brief. Even as great a critic as *I. A. Richards* finds in it a totle rejection of life. However, this is far from the truth. *B. Rajan* is nearer the truth when he says that in the last poems, "Instead of life disdained, we have life raged against, but also eagerly accepted." The old man still longs for 'passion, for 'frenzy' and would again like to be young to enjoy the charms of women. Thus there is no rejection of life, and the grief and impatience of the poet result from the fact that he is no longer young enough to enjoy the pleasure of life.

## Hyperbolism and Self-dramatisation

Another charge that has been brought against him is that of indulging in hyperbolic, exaggerated statements. *D. S. Savage* finds in his poetry, "the repeated use of hyperbolic phrases and of resounding words whose effect is to

inflate the meaning." An old man is a "tattered coat upon a stick," the poet's imagination is "fantastical", the days grow "dragon-ridden", and there is "blood and mire" everywhere. Such hyperbolic words and phrases are overworked and so grow wearisome and hollow, and lead him into, "tremendous, non-sensical asservations." Closely allied with, and akin to, this hyperbolism is Yeats' habit of self-dramatisation, his dandyism, and his exaggerated emotionalism. We often find the poet "flaunting his personality" in his verse, but that personality is a mask, a dramatic convenience for the writing of verse. He strikes poses and one can never be sure if he really means what he says.

**Lack of Contemporaneity : Inhumanity**

Another shortcoming of Yeats' poetry is its lack of contemporaneity. There are few references to factories, railways, aeroplanes, screaming engines and automobiles and other similar things which make up modern life. His imagery is not drawn from modern life. "Yeats ignores the contemporary scene, which means that he ignores much of his own experience, and when he attempts at times to incorporate a contemporary refrence into his verse requiring the exploitation of modern imagery, the result is not fortunate." Thus modern war is not presented adequately in *Lapis Lazuli*, an admirable poem otherwise. In a democratic age we find him upholding the values of the aristocratic tradition : in the age of industrialism he is all for the rural way of life. He thus shows a curious insensibility to the rhythmical currents of modern life which determine the verse forms of other contemporary poets. As time went on, Yeats become more and more an isolated figure· He had no faith either in Christianity or in contemporary science, and his fellow-beings could not share his peculiar vision, his faith in the curious magical mystical-mythological system which he developed to give form and pattern to the phantesmagoria that passed within his brain. This spiritual isolation imparts a tone of curiously cold inhuma-

nity to his later verse. Yeats does not share in the sorrows and sufferings, joys and pleasures, of the world at large. He can be warn and human where his personal friends are concerned, but he certainly lacks, as even sympathetic critics like *Stock* agree, the modern humanitarian spirit. Some kind of harmony is necessary between poet and his world, but in the case of Yeats this harmony was lacking, and so despite his creative gift and inward imagination he could not attain the height of a Milton or a Dante and create a great epic or tragedy. He had cast too cold eye on life, and had to suffer the consequences. He rejected most things the modern world belies in and feels for, and hence his poetry sounds inhuman, distant, remote. He often strikes one as a distant voice speaking from afar.

**Coarseness and Brutality**

For the later Yeats there seems to be no human mean between the supernatural and the bestial, the inhuman purity of the moon and the animal regings of the blood. He is always indugling in extremes. There is too much of blood, dust and mud in the last poems. As *D. S. Savage* puts it, "in *the Last Poems and Plays*, we have the glorification of violence and war, the celebration of sexuality, the same inner emptiness revealed either in an expression of a sense of personal futility or in the insistence upon a hysterical and nihilistic exultation." Some of these poems might have a barbaric beauty and splendour, but it is a splendour of desolation and emptiness, a cold, inhuman beauty of a political lampoon or a ballad of violence. Hence it is that even *C. M. Bowra* is forced to conclude that *the Last Poems* reveal a full in the artist's powers.

**Yeats' Permanence**

In this way, the critics continue to wrangle about some one or the other aspect of Yeats' poetry. The voluminous literature that has grown round him reveals the fascination he has exercised on all those who have

cared to read him and this is a measure of his greatness. Yeats had the creative gift, he had the inner conviction, he had wisdom, he had full command over his resources, and these are very qualities that go into the making of a great poet. Passion, intensity and fervour are the key-notes of the greatest poetry, and these Yeats has in ample measure. He may not be a Shakespeare, a Dante, or a Milton but he must certainly rank with the greatest poet of all times. Yeats' permanence is beyond question.

THE END

# SELECTED POEMS

## WITH

## Introduction, Exp!anation & meanings

## SEPTEMBER, 1913

Great as this poem is, the poet's anger at the rank stupidity of his countrymen found expression not only in his prose works but in four more poems. One called *September, 1913*, was at once the expression of his sorrow and anger and a tribute to an old leader, O'Leary. This great leader had passed away in 1907 ; and with him had passed away a certain liberal outlook on life. The new leadership was littleminded and fanatic. Yeats had no sympathy with it.

What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone ?
For men were born to pray and save :
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Yet they were of a different kind,
The names that stilled your childish play,
They have gone about the world like wind,
But little time had they to pray
For whom the bangman's rope was spun,
And what, God help us, could they save ?
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Was it for this the wild geese spread
The grey wing upon every tide ;
For this that all that blood was shed,
For this Edward Fitzgerald died,
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,
All that delirium of the brave ?
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Yet could we turn the years again,
And call those exiles as they were
In all their loneliness and pain,
You'd cry, 'Some woman's yellow riq
Has maddened every mother's son' :
They weighed so lightly what they Eve.
But let them be, they're dead and gone,
They're with O'Leary in the grave.

*" Romanitc Ireland's dead and gone*
*It's with O'Leary in the grave."*

With these two lines as a refrain, he composed this fine tribute to past leadership and elegy on the modern one. In some early poems, the poet, had used refrains, but perhaps never yet so happily as now. Here it helps, as at its best refrains should do, to order perception. As Blackmur has put it, "Refrain, or nearly identical repetition, gives particular form, on a general and dependable model, to gesture that might otherwise be formless. Refrain is the emphatic measure of all those gestures that have to do with the declaration of recurrence, return, rebirth and new birth, of motion in stillness, and stillness in motion, of permanence in change, and change in permanence. It is the lyric gesture of recognition and the emphatic gesture of identity." This admirable poem consists of four stanzas of eight lines each. The first hits at the shameful reality of so called leaders collecting money from their poor followers. Patriotism, it seems, is little more than the work of cellecting pennies and halfpennies, as if men were 'born to pray and save'.

The second stanza, rather sentimental in tone, gives a loving picture of the older leadership. They had neither the time to save money nor to offer prayers. Theirs was a harder task of real constructive work.

The third stanza, rather rhetorical, asks the question : Was it fer this that the older leaders made such sacrifices ?

Many were exiled or exiled themselves ('the wild geese'); many like Edward Fitzgerald (1753—1798) laid down their lives. (He fought in the American War on the British side, but made preparation for a rebellion against England, was betrayed and captured. He died of wounds sustained at his arrest.) Other like Robert Emmet (1778—1803) were captured, tried and hanged. Still others like Wolfe Tone (1768—1798) committed suicide. Their struggles, "that delirium of the brave," were of no advantage if their successors were merely to go about making and collecting money.

The fourth and the last stanza concentrates on what any one of those great people would say, if they could come back, and what the modern generation would say of them. The modern will not be able to recognize their patriotism. Modern leadership will think that the older leaders were perhaps the victims of some love affair; else they would not have laid down their lives so easily. Any way, it does not matter. "They are with O'Leary in the grave".

The first three stanzas ended with the refrain given above; the last modifies it to "they're with O'Leary in the grave". Thus the great fall in the standards of patriotism is brought home as if with the repeated sound of a hammer. The poet has thus created a new legend, a legend of Irish struggle for freedom and of those who died for the freedom of a country which knows them not, and of whom it is unworthy. There is throughout a note of fierceness, and as Professor Henn Puts it. "The refrain takes up a fiercer cleaner note, even to the insolence of the false rhyme at the ending, in what is perhaps the most powerful of the political ballads".

The hangover of the poet's anger with contemporary Ireland also found expression in a sixteen line poem entitled *To a Friend whose work has come to nothing*. Many believed that this friend was Sir Hugh Lane of whom something has been said before The poet himself says that it was Lady Gregory herself. What matters, however, is the unforgiving tone of hatred that the poet

adopts for those who opposed attempts to give new life to arts in Ireland These aristocrats "being honour bred" could not compete with those with " brazen throats", who are lost to all sense of shame. Even when confuted, they (the popular but misguided leaders of opinion) are neither shamed in their own eyes nor in those of their neighbours. It is best, therefore, to laugh at these worthless fry in secret and engage in no controverey with them.

Still another expression of the poet's withering contempt for the populace and its ways is his six line epigrammatic poem *One Those that hated the playboy of the Western World*. When this now wellknown play was staged in Dublin, the mob demonstrated against its supposed indelicate language and uncomplimentary representation of Irish life. Yeats never forgave his countrymen their prurience. In these six lines, he compared them to eunuchs running through Hell and staring at Don Juan's 'sinewy thigh'. The poem is almost downright abuse which is saved from billingsgate by the devilish insight that the poet has into the reason for the mass hysteria provoked by that powerful drama.

## EASTER 1916

It was not possible for any one to think or express himself at the metaphysical level too often ; and the poet is seen to better advantage when he is not wholly devoted io the expression of his vision of abstract reality. He is more easy to understand in poems of a more earthly intent. Among these, *Easter 1916* has easily the pride of place. There have been occasions above when notice had to be taken of the poet's lack of sympathy with his native land. He had reason to feel that his work had not been properly appreciated or viewed sympathetically. But there were events to which he could not shut his eyes. At the height of the war, Irish patriots had enacted a heroic conflict with England to get freedom for their country. This was the work that had engaged heroes of the past, Emmets and the Wolf Tones. The haze of distance which surrounded these names had given them

great glory ; but Yeats saw that even ordinary men, men for whom he did not always have much regard, had been ennobled within his own life time by the supreme sacrifice they had embarked upon or performed. The Easter Rising could easily be seen, not as isolated incident, but as a part of the pattern of history. He was not quite persuaded that all that bloodshed was wise, but he was convinced that the "late Dublin Rebellion, whatever one may say of its wisdom, will long be remembered for its heroism." He had never believed patriotism to have much to do with great poetry ; but fact was stranger than theory. In the presence of heroic action he could not remain dumb ; and hence he took upon himself to celebrate those who had struck a blow for liberty.

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly :
A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill,
What voice more sweet than hers
When, young and beautiful,
She rode to barriers ?
This man had kept a school
And rode our winged horse ;

This other his helper and friend
Was coming into his force ;
He might have won fame in the end,
So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thoughts
This other man I had dreamed
The other man I had dreamed

A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song ;
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy ;
He, too, had been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly :
A terrible beauty is born.
Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change ;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute ;
A horse hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse plashes within it ;
The long-legged moor-hens dive,
And hens to moor-cocks call ;
Minute by minute they live ;
The stone's in the midst of all.
Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice ?
That is Heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.

What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse—
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

In this great poem of eighty-tow lines, the poet uses only his speaking voice. From the tone one would never think that any heroic theme was being taken up. He keeps strictly to the bare facts and makes no attempt to read any heroics into them. If any one is the hero, it is a town, quitely going about its normal work. The actors of that drama are also ordinary people; the poet has often met them in the evening; he has often exchanged polite meaningless words with them; sometimes he has made fun of them. They seemed so ordinary. In the poem, the first eighteen lines are employed to recalling these common-place facts, and the poet is surprised that he was so mistaken about the possibilities latent in these, his fellow citizens. "A terrible beauty is born" and all is changed "utterly".

The next twenty-four lines are devoted to a sharp sketch of the chief actors. The first of these democratic spirits was a woman, the Countess Markiewicz who was once a beauty but was now passing her time in 'ignorant good-will' and pleasant conversation (She was a famous politician, took part in the Irish Rebellion of 1916, was sentenced to death, but was released in 1917, and lived to be a member of Parliament and, later on, of the Irish

Lower house. She died in 1927, full of honours). Seven lines ending with her riding to harriers (or hunting) are devoted to her. The next to be mentioned is the schoolmaster, Pearce, who gets two lines ; then comes his friend, Connolly. Then comes the person whom the poet regarded as a "drunken vain-glorious lout," his successful rival in love, who had married and then divorced Maud Gonne; from being a comic character, he has been completely changed. Like a refrain, the sentence. "A terrible beauty is born" is repeated as if to emphasize the miracle that patriotic self-sacrifice can work.

In the third round of sixteen lines, the poet instead of idolizing these impulsive people, sees in them a fanaticism not quite desirable. In the living stream such one-track minds are like stones. This is a beautiful image. The men who act thus become callous like stones. In the last twenty-four lines, the poet asks if all this great sacrifice was necessary. After all, England may keep her promise to give Ireland her due independence after the Great War. He, however, feels that it is a needless question. It is perhaps better to think that their excess of love for their country blinded them. But one thing is clear that whereover green is worn (wherever there ar Irish men) the names of these great patriots will be remembered with respect and love. The are no more to be thought of as ordinary men. " A terrible beauty is born."

When one thinks of the terrible temptation which such a subject presents to any poet, one cannot but admire Yeats's firm decision to keep away from the rhetorical or sentimental note. He is faithful to his vision. He will not lift his voice. He will depend for his effect on plain unadorned every day speech ; homely phrases like " polite meaningless words", " where motley is worn" (where people can be silly), " ignorant good-will," " the casual comedy " do the trick. There is nothing cheap or tawdry about the presentation, and that is why the tone of speech lingers in the reader's memory long after he has come across the poem.

## THE SECOND COMING

**Interpretation**

The widespread murder and bloodshed in Ireland, consequent upon the Easter rebellion of 1916, the Irish Civil War which followed, the Great War and the various other events in Europe filled Yeats with gloomy forebodings. *The Second Coming*, written in 1921, derives its force and significance from his inner gloom. In this astonishing poem, says *Stock*, he, "sets his own age in the perspective of eternity," and condenses, "a whole philosophy of history into it, so that it has the force of prophecy."

To Yeats, the world seemed to be disintegration, and a new age in human history seemed to be taking birth. Indeed, *The Second Coming* is one of those few poems which require some knowledge of Yeats' philosophy of history for a clearer understanding. Yeats believed that the process of history was a cyclic one. He compared it to the movement of rapidly rotating gyres or cones. The gyres spin swiftly round a fixed centre. Their circumference widen as they rotate and ultimately disintegration sets in. The disintegration begins at the circumference, and gradually reaches the centre.

He believed that the present cycle of history began two thousand year ago, with the birth of Christ and the revelation. Previous to that there was the Grecio-Roman Civilisation, which in its turn began in 2000 B. C. with the mating of god Zeus with Leda. Helen and Clytemnestra were born as a result of this union and then followed the various events narrated in the Homeric epics.

The Pagan civilisation broke down after a life of two thousand years ; Christ came, and a new civilisation was born out of the ruins of the earlier one. Similarly, the Christian civilisation has nearly run its course of two thousand years, and so, believes Yeats, a *Second Coming* is at hand. History repeats itself, though always with a difference. The present wheel of history has come full circle, and out of its ruin a new civilisation is taking

shape. To us the birth of the new may appear to be the doom of the old : its values may appear to us monstrous and terryfying, the very thoughts may be a nightmare to us, but certain it is that a change is in the offing, and it is possible that the future is already being shaped in some remote far off region.

All this and much more is condensed in this remarkable poem of twenty-five lines, and it is this condensation which makes it prophetic, almost apoclyptic in its impact. The poem begins abruptly as if the poet is seeing a vision and expressing it. As if in a trance, the poet sees a gyre or cone rotating rapidly round a fixed centre. Its circumference gradually widens and ultimately even the centre fails to control its movements. Disintegration sets in : "*Things fall apart ; the centre cannot hold.*" The falconer has lost control over the falcon, which does not hear his call. Falcon symbolises the intellect, and falconer the soul or the spiritual and emotional part of man. Intellect —science, technology, rationalism—is too much with us, and it is taking us towards total destruction. As a result, sheer anarchy has been let loose upon the world. There is bloodshed and violence everywhere. "The blood-dimmed tide," carries with it a suggestion of blind passion and evokes the image of the Great Biblical Flood and the havoc which it caused. Everywhere the traditional and aristocratic way of life, a way which has always fostered purity and innocence, is in danger of extinction. The best, the wisest, the aristocratic have lost all faith and conviction, and the worst, the masses, are fanatical, irrational, and violent.

All this decadence and disorder implies that a new civilisation is about to be born. Just as God incarnated himself in the form of Christ when the Grecio-Roman civilisation broke down two thousand years ago, so also the second coming of the God seems to be at hand. A second incarnation seems to be in the offing. As soon as the thought flashes across the poet's mind, he sees the image of some vast from coming out of *Spiritus Mundi*, a kind of storehouse of images in Yeats' philosophy. This

huge form has the body of a lion and the head of a man. It is seen coming out of some far desert and moving slowly with a clumsy, awkward movement towards Bethlehem, the birth place of Christ, as if it, too, would be born there. The figure is so monstrous, so nightmarish, that the birds fly before it in terror. The monster has a pitiless, blank look, as if it were the symbol of the inexorable. pitiless destiny. It symbolises mindless and merciless violence, and its birth is the death of the present civilisation.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer ;
Things fall apart ; the centre cannot hold ;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned ;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand ;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming ! Hardly are these words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight : somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert bird.
The darkness drops again ; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rought beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born ?

*The Second Coming* has received a good deal of praise at the hand of critics. For *Stock*, the poem has the very force a prophecy. The ominous shape has been left purposely vague and indeterminate to suggest that the shape of things to come is beyond human comprehension. It appears monstrous and terrifying to us only because it

supersedes our traditions and way of life. May be, it will be regarded as beneficient and generous like Christ himself by the generation to come. *Prof. Blackmoor*, praises it for its right use of words. In writing this poem, "Yeats was able to choose words which to an appreciable extent were the right words to reveal or represent the emotion which was its purpose." *A. critic* sees in it the very perfection of Yeats' technical skill. In the first line, the sense of the inexorable movement of the wheel of history is conveyed by the repetition of "*turnnig*", and the fourfold repetition of the "*in*" sound. In the last two lines of the poem, the "*ou*" sound, four times repeated, conveys the slow shambling of the monster. The poem is an expression of a vision, and says *C. M. Bowra*, "The measured verse, the repeated phrase, the simple and terribly effective images, convey this moment of concentrated and amazed vision." Nor does the poem convey merely a personal vision ; all of us, at sometime or the other, have felt a vague apprehension of some nameless evil coming into the world. It is thus the expression of a universal experience, and this accounts for the fact that the poem has become a part of the educated conscience all over the English speaking world.

*Gyre*—a cone or wheel ; to rotate rapidly.

*The Ceremony of innocence*—the traditional and aristocratic way of life which fostered purity and innocence.

*Passionate intensity*—fanaticism and violence.

*Revelation*—the apocalypse or the disclosure of sacred truths by God, either directly or through some agent. Thus these sacred truths were revealed two thousand years ago through Christ. Now a second coming seems to be in the offing for this very purpose.

*Spiritus Mundi*—In Yeats' philosophy, "a general storehouse of images which have ceased to be the property of any personality or spirit."

*Slouches*—an awkward, ungainly movement.

*Bethlehem*—the place where Jesus Christ was born, two thousand years ago.

## SAILING TO BYZANTIUM

**Introduction**

*Sailing to Byzantium*, 1927, is the first poem in the volume of verses entitled *The Tower*. Byzantium, the old name for Constantinople or Istambul, was the capital of the Eastern part of the Roman empire. It was a great centre of mosaic art and metal enamelling. Its fall to the Turks in 1453, led to the revival of Greek art and culture known as the Renaissance. In the poem, Byzantium symbolises some transcendental country, a place out of time and Nature, a world of art and philosophy.

I

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms ; birds in the trees,
—Those dying generations—at their song ;
The solmon—falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

II

An aged man is but a paltry thing.
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments af its owń magnificence ;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

III

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away ; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not that it is ; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

IV

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake ;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

**Stanza 1 : Substance**

The poet is not satisfied with the country in which he has been living and considers it unsuitable for old men. It is a country in which all are given to sensual pleasures, and art and philosophy, "monuments of unageing intellect" are neglected.

*The Young in.........arms*—the youth are given to the pleasures of sex.

*Dying Generations*—'Generation' signifies the reproductive process and sexual gratification. It also reminds one of Keats', "No hungry generations tread thee down."

*Salmon-falls*—Waterfalls crowded with Salmon (a fish). The falls in question were Sligo river.

*Mackerel*—another small fish.

*Commend*—treat as worthy of acceptance ; recommend.

*Begotten*—sexually conceived and given birth to.

*The sensual music*—the pleasures of the senses, specially sexual pleasures.

*Monuments*—memorials.

*Monuments.........intellect*—immortal works of art and literature, the product of the intellect and the spirit, as contrasted with the 'dying generation', the result of sexual gratification.

**Stanza 2 : Substance**

An old man is contemptible unless his soul can enjoy works of art and literature, which are the immortal pro-

ducts of the human spirit. The weaker a man grows in body, the greater should be his joy in the works of art. This joy, this singing and dancing, this artistic pleasure, can be learnt only by studying immortal works of art. It is for this reason that the poet is sailing to Byzantium, a country known for its great artistic treasures.

*A tattered coat upon a stick*—a scarecrow. An old man is as contemptible and helpless as a scarecrow.

*Soul clap............sing*—the soul dances and sings with joy. The line reminds one of Blake's vision of the soul clapping its hands and dancing.

*For*—the more the tatters, the louder the song.

*Singing school*—a school where singing can be learned.

*Monuments of its own magnificence*—great works of art, the immortal products of the human soul.

*The holy city*—Byzantium is a holy city for the poet because it is a great centre of art and culture.

**Stanza 3 : Substance**

The poet visualises the great artists in history standing like mosaic figures in holy fire in heaven and thus undergoing a process of purification. He fervently prays to them to come down from that holy fire, moving rapidly with a circular, spinning motion, and to teach his soul to sing with artistic pleasure. They should purify his heart of all sensual passion for he can no longer enjoy pleasures of the senses. Purged of all passions, the poet wishes to become a part of the immortal products of art.

*Sages*—great artists in history.

*God's holy fire*—the fire of the Eternal artificer (artist) which purifies as well as moulds into a artistic shapes.

*Mosaic*—Byzantium was known for its mosaic art. In mosaic work figures are made out of pieces of coloured glass or some precious stone. In ancient Byzantium, angels,

saints, etc., were represented in mosaic on the walls of churches.

*Perne in a gyre*—"To move with a circular spinning motion". (**Jeffares**).

*Consume my heart away*—heart is seat of passion. The poet prays to the saints that they should purify his heart of all sensuality.

*Dying animals*—the poet himself, old and decrepit and unable to enjoy sensual pleasures.

*It*—the poet's heart.

*Artifice*—that which art produces.

**Stanza 4 : Substance**

Once the poet is dead *i.e.*, his soul is out of his physical self, he will never enter the body of any other living creature. Rather, he would like to be a perfect work of art such as was made by the goldsmiths of ancient Greece out of hammered gold or gold enamelling. He would like to be a golden nightingale sitting on a golden bough, such as were fashioned by Byzantium artists to keep the king, lords and ladies of Byzantium awake by sgining to them of the past, the present and the future.

*Out of nature*—dead, the soul having left the body.

*Any natural thing*—any living creature. The reference is to the theory of transmigration of souls.

*Gold enamelling*—gold can be covered with a colourful, glossy coating which fuses with it under heat and then hardens. Byzantium was famous for its gold enamelling.

*But such a form......make*—Yeats wrote, "I have read somewhere that in the emperor's palace at Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver, and artificial birds that sang".

**Interpretation**

*The Sailing to Byzantium*—composed in 1928, is one of Yeats' best known poems, which has received considerable attention from critics. It is remarkable for its richness and complexity, revealing successive readings. Byzantium, now called Constantinople or Istanbul, was the capital of the Eastern wing of the Holy Roman Empire. It was noted for its art, specially mosaic work, and gold enamelling. However, in the poem it is no real city but, "a country of the mind," a city outside time and Nature, a utopia, a retreat from the process of ageing and decaying. As *Wilson* emphasises, it is a symbol, "of the world of intellect and the spirit." "Sailing to Byzantium symbolises the mental orientation, a psychological change from a mentality which values the pleasures of sexuality and the flesh, to one which values things of the mind, the spirit and the soul."

The poet is growing old, and he finds that the country, Ireland, where he lives at present, is not suited to an old man. It is a country in which all living creatures young and in the fulness of their powers, are given to sensual and sexual pleasures. Reproductive activity goes on everywhere ; birds, beasts and fish all alike indulge in it. It is a sensual world, and engrossed in sensuality, nobody cares for "monuments of unageing intellect" *i.e.*, for works of art and literature which are the products of mind and the spirit, and hence immortal.

Old age is a time of physical decay and decline, when a man no longer has the capacity for physical enjoyment. He becomes as worthless and helpless as a scarecrow. He is a contemptible figure, a mere "tattered coat upon a stick", unless he devotes himself to the study and enjoyment of art. The older he grows, the greater should be his devotion to art. Appreciation and understanding of art can be achieved only by studying magnificent and immortal works of art. Since Byzantium is the traditional home o art, the poet has decided to go there to devote himself tf the study of its rich treasures. The image "unless soulo clap its hands and sing" reminds one of *William Blake's*

vision of the soul clapping its hands and dancing and singing. The poet has called Byzantium "holy" for it is devoted to spiritual and intellectual activity, and not to the "unholy", the physical and the sensuous.

Therefore, the poet sails for Byzantium and as soon as he reaches there, he prays, not to God, but to God's saints to come down from heaven and teach him the appreciation of art. The 'sages' are great artists of Byzantium who created in the past "monuments of unageing intellects," and who are its guardian angels, so to say. He visualises them standing in God's "holy fire," like figures in mosaic-work, standing against a background of pure gold. The fire is a symbol of purification, and it does them no harm for they are supernatural. The poet invokes them to come down with a rapid spiral-movement and to teach him how to enjoy the beauty of art. They should purify his heart of all physical passions and desire, for he is old, like a dying animal, incapable of any physical enjoyment. He is disgusted with physical desires for he can no longer gratify them. The poet does not understand his own longing, his own self. He is sick of life, meaningless and devoid of all useful activity. He prays to them for his absorption into the "artifice of eternity" *i.e.*, to enable him, by purifying him of the sensuous and the physical, to devote himself to the spiritual. Physical death means life of the spirit and it is for this eternity that the poet longs. The medial rhyme in the third line of the stanza and its almost incantatory music are a measure of Yeats' technical skill.

Once the poet is "out of nature" *i.e.*, dead physically, he will not enter the body of any other living creature. Instead, he will like to become a golden bird, a perfect work of art such as was shaped by the great artists of Byzantium. Such birds were set on golden boughs, and they sang of the past, the present and the future to keep awake the drowsy emperor of the lords and ladies of his court. As works of art, they were not subject to the ravages of time. In short, the poet prays to the saints to grant him an eternity such as is enjoyed by the art of Byzantium. "Grecian goldsmiths" remind one of Keats'

'*Ode to a Grecian Urn*', another perfect, and, therefore, eternal work of art and 'the golden bough' is reminiscent, first of the golden bough which *Aeneas* carried and which unlocked for him the gates of Hades, and secondly of the well-known book *The Golden Bough* of *James Frazer*,

This highly allusive and complex poem bears out *Stock's* contention that Yeats poetry is a battle ground for the clash of opposites. The poet has not only rendered the opposites, "country-city, sexuality-intellectuality, dying-unageing, body-soul, flesh-spirit, holy—unholy", but he has also tried to re-concile them by conceiving in the manner of Plotinus, a city outside Time. As *Cleanth Brooks* points out, "*The poem can be taken on a number of levels : as the transition from sensual art to intellectual art ; as the poet's new and brilliant insight into the nature of the Byzantine imagination ; as the poet's coming to terms with age and death.*"

## THE TOWER

Another very powerful poem, *The Tower* was also written at about the same time. In this also the leading motif was the feeling that the poet was physically becoming weaker every day, while his passions, political and personal, were getting stronger. In his youth, the poet had read and edited Blake ; in his old age he reverted to that mystic. He was specially touched by a fragment of one of that poet's letters in which there was a reference to his old age—an apt description which was equally true of Yeats himself; in it Blake had written. "I have been very near the gates of death, and have returned very weak, and an old man feeble and tottering, but not in spirits and life, not in the real man, the imagination which liveth for ever. In that I am stronger and stronger as this foolish body decays." With such thoughts and feelings, the poet sat in his tower (the old fashioned building he had bought in Galway which had bcome his aristocratic symbol), and surveyed the entire scene about him.

## THE TOWER

### I

What shall I do with this absurdity—
O heart, O troubled heart—this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's taill?

Never had I more
Excited, passionate, fantastical
Imagination, nor an ear and eye
That More expected the impossible—
No, not in boyhood when with rod and fly,
Or the humbler worm, I climbed Ben Bulben's back
And had the livelong summer day to spend.
It seems that I must bid the Muse go pack,
Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend

Until imagination, ear and eye,
Can be content with argument and deal
In abstract things ; or be derided by
A sort of battered kettle at the heel.

### II

I pace upon the battlements and stare
On the foundations of a house, or where
Tree, like a sooty finger, starts from the earth ;
And send imagination forth
Under the day's declining beam, and call
Images and memoires
From ruin or from ancient trees,
For I would ask a question of them all,

Beyond that ridge lived Mrs. French, and once
When every silver candlestick or sconce
Lit up the dark mahogany and the wine,
A serving-man, that could divine
That most respected lady's every wish,
Ran and with the garden shears
Clipped an insolent farmer's ears
And brough them in a little covered dish.

Some few remembered still when I was young
A peasant girl commended by a song,
Who'd lived somewhere upon that rocky place,
And praised the colour of her face,
And had the greater joy in praising her,
Remembering that, if walked she there,
Farmers jostled at the fair
So great a glory did the song confer.

And certain men, being maddened by these rhymes,
Or else by toasting her a score of times,
Rose from the table and declared it right
To test their fancy by their sight ;
But they mistook the brightness of the moon
For the prosaic light of day—
Music had driven their wits astray—
And one was drowned in the great bog of Cloone.

Strange, but the man who made the song was blind ;
Yet, now I have considered it, I find
That nothing strange ; the tragedy began
With Homer that was a blind man,
And Helen has all living hearts betrayed.
O may the moon and sunlight seem
One inextricable beam,
For if I triumph I must make men mad.

And I myself created Hanrahan
And drove him drunk or sober through the dawn
From somewhere in the neighbouring cottages.
Caught by an old man's juggleries
He stumbled, tumbled, fumbled to and fro
And had but broken knees for hire
And horrible splendour of desire :
I thought it all out twenty years ago ;

Good fellows shuffled cards in an old bawn ;
And when that ancient ruffian's turn was on
He so bewitched the cards under his thumb
That all but the one card became
A pack of hounds and not a pack of cards,
And that he changed into a hare.

Hanrahan rose in frenzy there
And followed up those baying creatures towards—

O towards I have forgotten what—enough !
I must recall a man that neither love
Nor music nor an enemy's clipped ear
Could, he was so harried, cheer ;
A figure that has grown so fabulons
There's not a neighbour left to say
When he finished his dog's day:
And ancient bankrupt master of this house.

Before that ruin came, for centuries,
Rough men-at-arms, cross-gartered to the knees
Or shod in iron, climbed the narrow stairs,
And certain men-at-arms there were
Whose images, in the Great Memory stored,
Come with loud cry and panting breast
To break upon a sleeper's rest
While their great wooden dice beat on the board.

As I would question all, come all who can ;
Come old, necessitous, half-mounted man ;
And bring beauty's blind rambling celebrant ;
The red man the juggler sent
Through God-forsaken meadows ; Mrs. French,
Gifted with so fine an ear ;
The man drowned in a bog's mire,
When mocking Muses chose the country wench.

Did all oldmen and women, rich and poor,
Who trod upon these rocks or passed this door,
Whether in public or in secret rage
As I do now against old age ?
But I have found an answer in those eyes
That are impatient to be gone ;
Go therefore ; but leave Hanrahan,
For I need all his mighty memories.

Old lecher with a love an every wind
Bring up out of that deep considering mind
All that you have discovered in the grave

For it is certain that you have
Reckoned up every unforeknown, unseeing
Plunge, lured by a softening eye,
Or by a touch or a sigh,
Into the labyrinth of another's being ;

Does the imagination dwell the most
Upon a woman won or woman lost ?
If on the lost, admit you turned aside
From a great labyrinth out of pride,
Cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought
Or anything called conscience once ;
And that if memory recur, the sun's
Under eclipse and the day blotted out.

III

It is time that I wrote my will ;
I choose upstanding men
That climb the streams until
The fountain leap, and at dawn
Drop their cast at the side
Of dripping stone ; I declare
They shall inherit my pride,
The pride of people that were
Bound neither to Cause nor to State,
Neither to slaves that were spat on,
Nor to the tyrants that spat,
The people of Burke and Greattan
That gave, though free to refuse—
Pride, like that of the morn,
When the headlong light is loose,
Or what of the fabulous born,
Or that of the sudden shower
When all streams are dry,
Or that of the hour
When the swan must fix his eye
Upon a fading gleam,
Float out upon a long
Last reach of glittering stream
And there sing his last song.

And I declare my faith :
I mock Plotinus' thought
And cry in Plato's teeth,
Death and life were not
Till man made up the whole,
Made lock, stock and barrel
Out of his bitter soul,
Aye, sun and moon and star, all,
And further add to that
That, being dead, we rise,
Dream and so create
Translunar Paradise.
I have prepared my peace
With learned Italian things
And the proud stones of Greece,
Poet's imagining
And memories of love,
Memories of the words of women,
All those things whereof
Man makes a superhuman
Mirror-resembling dream.

As at the loophole there
The daws chatter and scream,
And drop twigs layer upon layer.
When they have mounted up,
The mother bird will rest
On their hollow top,
And so warm her wild nest.

I leave both faith and pride
To young upstanding men
Climbing the mountain-side,
That under bursting dawn
They may drop a fly ;
Being of that metal made
Till it was broken by
This sedentary trade.

Now shall I make my soul,
Compelling it to study
In a learned school

Till the wreck of body,
Slow decay of blood,
Testy delirium
Or dull decrepitude,
Or what worse evil come—
The death of friends, or death
Of every brilliant eye
That made a catch in the breath—
Seem but the clouds of the sky
When the horizon fades;
Or a bird's sleepy cry
Among the deepening shades.

**Explanation**

The poem is in three sections, the first consisting of sixteen lines. It is perhaps best to deal with it section by section. It begins with a tremendous gesture of dissatisfaction with old age that had begun bothering him. It is at one a powerful and disgusting pictuere of the old man's senility and physical weakness. The poet does not know what to do with this absurdity, this decrepit old age and compares it with some rattling thing tied to a dog's tail. His eyes and ears, his imagination and passions are as strong as ever, perhaps stronger than even in his youth. Perhaps it is time that he bade farewell to poetry, and took to reading Plato and Plotinus, getting interested in metaphysics, else he will be insulted and his name dragged in the mire.

The second section, much the longest and most interesting, is a survey, from the vantage point of the tower, of Irish history in terms of the decline of the aristocratic ideal. The poet is pacing on the battlements of the tower, looking at the trees near about and asks them about what ups and downs they have witnessed. He recalls that once upon a time (in the eighteenth century, the age when Ireland had a Protestant aristocracy) near that tower lived a Mrs. French. She was extremely aristocratic. Even before she could speak, her wishes were guessed by her devoted followers, and on one occasion, her servant "with the garden shears/clipped an insolent farmer's ears/And

brought them in a iittle covered dish." In his younger days, the poet was told of a peasant beauty whom people were mad to see; songs were written about her; and led by the desire to have a look at her, some men were so carried away that one of them was drowned in the bog of Cloone. It was still more interesting to remember that the person who had made a song about the peasant woman's beauty was himself blind.

Yet, the poet feels, that was only normal. It was blind Homer who sang about Helen. That is the pity. Passion makes people mad, that is why Helen became the cause of misery to so many. The poet himself created Hanrahan (in prose "*Stories of Red Hanrahan* 1897) who "stumbled, tumbled, fumbled" and broke his knees because of "the horrible splendour of desire." There have been others whom nothing, neither love, nor music nor the pleasure of revenge could cheer. They died unhappy deaths. Once he had been the owner of the house which is now the poet's. . . . .For centuries rough knights armed from head to foot climbed up the staircase of the tower; and the poet would like to know from all these characters, the man who got drowned in his anxiety to see the village beauty, red Hanrahan, Mrs. French—is they were as unhappy as the poet on the advent of old age. Then follow two very powerful stanzas, in which the poet questions his own Hanrahan (or himself as the creator of that character), "the old lecher" who has known every mystery of love. The question he would like to ask is:

> "*Does the imagination dwell the mosl*
> *Upon a woman won or woman lost* ?"

The poet then remembers his own hopeless love for Maud Gonne, thinks that imagination dwells most upon the woman lost. When the memory of the woman one could not get is revived, "the day is blotted out," because one cannot but analyse how she was lost, and he will find that at the bottom of that loss was either lack of courage, or "some silly over-subtle thought" (This was the poet's

explanation of his failure with Maud Gonne). The section ends on this twinge of conscience.

In the third section, the poet's mental conflict is over, and the transition to calmer thoughts is indicated by change over to a swifter and shorter line. He is now writing his will or political testament. He stands by the courageous people like Burke or Grattan who were not bound to any Cause or the State (who were independent powerful thinkers and reserved their right to espouse any side). He also declares that he neither cares for Plotinus nor Plato. He has nothing but contempt for them. The poet, like Faust of old, thinks of the infinite power of the human mind; and he 'has prepared his peace' with things of art, memories of love and poetic imaginings. He will now make his soul till the wreck of his body seems as casual as the clouds of the sky.

This deeply felt and powerfully worded poem has a schorching sincerity. This is so because the conflict between emotional desires and physical disability was fiercely raging in him. For all his devotion to Theosophy, to mysticism, to the Upanishads, to magic and to spirituality in general, Yeats was at heart sensuous and could not reconcile himself to a life without passion. Essentially greedy of sensations, he could not make his peace with the terms of life. Fortunately for art this conflict, waged furiously or otherwise in every human breast, has been transformed into beautiful and touching poetry. Its beauty and aptness of phrase, its vivid imagery, its fine idealism and its deeply felt symbolism will give this poem a place among the best that have been written in the twentieth century.

## LEDA AND THE SWAN

### Interpretation

*Leda and the Swan* is a sonnet of fourteen lines, and one of the most perfect poems ever-written by Yeats. This artistic perfection, as *Ellmann* points out, was achieved not spontaneously but through at least six stages of revision

and modification. It is the final fusion of history, myth and vision. Its force and richness arise from the fact that the poet has succeeded in it in enclosing "vast immensities" within a little compass.

A sudden blow : the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs ?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies ?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop,

**Explanation**

The sonnet is a picturesque and dramatic presentation of the story of *Leda and the Swan* taken from Greek mythology. According to the Greek story, Leda was the mother of mankind. Zeus or Jupiter appeared to her in the form of a swan, and made love to her. Out of this copulation of the human and the super-human, of God and woman, were born the great heroes and heroines who created the Athenian civilisation and whose exploits have been narrated in the great Homeric epics. Thus Leda became the mother of Helen, Castor and Pollux, and Clytemnesr a. The copulation of Jupiter and Leda, in other words, sett in motion a train of events which resulted in the destructive Trojan war, and the various events narrated in the great Aeschylian tragedies.

The story has been narrated by the poet, dramatically, vividly and with almost a Dantesque concentration. A big bird is represented as giving a sudden and staggering blow to a girl bathing naked in a pond. The bird, fluttering over her, caressing her thighs, holding her nape with her beak, and pressing her helpless breasts upon its breasts, must have been a nerve-shattering experience for the terrified girl. She was helpless in the clutches of "the brute blood of the air," and her helplessness is signified by the loosening of her thighs—an expression rich in overtones of sexuality. Thus god mated with a mortal. The event was a fateful one as it set in motion a whole chain of events. The girl gave birth to Helen and the result was the Trojan war and the burning of the roof and tower of that city. She gave birth to Clytemnestra and the result was the tragedy or Agamemnon.

The poem is highly suggestive, rich and complex. It suggests super-human intervention in human affairs at critical moments. In this way it puts us in mind of Virgin Mary and her dove, and of the coming of Christ two thousand years ago. Civilisation was born with the mating of a god with a mortal ; when its first phase ended, the second began with the incarnation of a god. Now the second cycle is drawing to a close and super-human intervention must take place once again in some form or the other. Thus mythology gets linked-up with Yeats' vision of the futnre of mankind. Further, the poem puts us in mind that beautiful women have always been destructive. Witness, for example, the destruction caused by Helen and Clytemnestra. The image of Helen evokes the image of Maud Gonne, another destructive woman who hurled little streets upon the great. In this way, the past is fused with the present, and with the future, and the poet succeeds in compressing whole ages in a small lyric of fourteen lines.

Yeats' poetry has been called by *Stock* and others a battle ground for the clash of opposites and in this short poem the poet has rendered the opposites of spirit and flesh, human and super-human, knowledge and power, brute force and feminine helplessness, violence and passive

sufferance, mythology and prophetic vision, creation and destruction. The lyric opens out vast vistas before the mind's eye and is a triumph of poetic art.

## AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN

**Interpretation**

*Among School Children,* written in 1926, is a remarkable poem divided into eight stanzas of eight lines each. At the time Yeats was a member of the Irish Senate and a successful public figure. The poem was written after a Senate-inspired visit to Waterford Convent. As the poet enters the school, he is conducted through the classes by a kind old nun. The children are at their work and look with open-eyed wonder at "the sixty-year old smiling public man." But memories soon crowd in upon him and he is reminded of Maud Gonne as she must have been as a child at school. "A stiffled nostalgic sigh works as the prevailing undertone and gives a tragic solemnity to the whole picture."

I

I walk through the long school room questioning ;
A kind old nun in a white hood replies ;
The children learn to cipher and to sing,
To study reading-books and histories,
To cut and sew, be neat in everything
In the best modern way—the children's eyes
In momentary wonder stare upon
A sixty-year-old smiling public man.

II

I dream of Ledaean body, bent
Above a sinking fire, a tale that she
Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event
That changed some childish day to tragedy—
Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent
Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,
Or else, to alter Plato's parable,
Into the yolk and white of the one shell.

III

And thinking of that fit of grief or rage
I look upon one child or t'other there
And wonder if she stood so at that age—
For even daughters of the swan can share
Something of every paddler's heritage—
And had that colour upon cheek or hair,
And thereupon my heart is driven wild :
She stands before me as a living child.

IV

Her present image floats into the mind—
Did Quattrocento finger fashion it
Howllow of cheek as though it drank the wind
And took a mass of shadows for it meat ?
And I though never of Ledaean kind
Had pretty plumage once-enough of that
Better to smile on all that smile, and show
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow

V

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap
Honey of generation had betrayed,
And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape
As recollection or the drug decide,
Would think her son, did she but see that shape
With sixty or more winters on its head,
A compensation for the pang of his birth,
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth ?

VI

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things ;
Solider Aristotle played the taws
Upon the bottom of a king of kings ;
World famous golden thighed Pythagoras
Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings
What a star sang and careless Muses heard :
Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

VII

Both nuns and mothers worship images,
But those the candles light are not as those
That animate a mother's reveries,
But keep a marble or a bronze repose
And yet they too break hearts – O Presences
That passion, piety or affection knowes,
And that all heavenly glory symbolise—
O self-born mockers of man's enterprise ;

VIII

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole ?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance ?

As the poet looks at the little girls, he is reminded of another girl, Maud Gonne, with classic Leda-like features. Once Maud, too, must have been a student at school like the little girls that stand before him at the time. The past is thus linked-up with the present and the personal with the impersonal in the imagination of the poet. The image of Maud Gonne puts him in mind of a particular day when she had told him how, while at school, petty incidents or reproofs from the teacher would cause great unhappiness to her and would turn the entire day into a tragedy. The poet had listened to her narration, had sympathised with her, till their two souls had seemed to fuse and blend into one, like the yoke and white of an egg.

The poet's thoughts keep running on the image of Maud Gonne, and he looks upon this girl and that and imagines that Maud-Gonne, too, as a child, must have been very much like the girl now standing before him. No doubt her beauty was classical like that of Helen—the daughter of the Swan—but even beautiful women have much in common with plain ones having ordinary features.

The colour of the cheeks and hair of one of the girls reminds him of the complexion of his beloved, his imagination runs wild, and he sees her as if she were actually standing before him.

The poet is then reminded of Maud's looks in her old age. She had hollow cheeks, was old and decrepit, and looked as if she drank only wind and had only shadows for her food. Still, despite her old age she was a fit object for a great work of art. By a natural transition, the poet is reminded of his own old age. Though he was never of the Ledaean kind, once he too was quite handsome, had pretty plumage. But it is no use sighing for vanished youth and beauty. One must keep smiling and show the world that even if one has grown a scarecrow, one is at least a comfortable kind of scarecrow. Old age and death are grim realities. They must be accepted, and one must learn to make the best of a bad bargain.

Decay and decline is the law of nature, and no human effort can alter this law. If mothers knew how ugly and decrepit their sons would look in their old age, none of them will take the trouble of bearing children or starting them in their lives. Sons will then no longer be a source of joy or a sort of compensation to their mothers for the pain of bringing them into this world. The 'Honey' of generation is the drug that destroys in the newly-born soul the recollection of its pre-natal freedom. The newly-born child accepts this life and forgets its earlier freedom. Similarly, mothers, too, must forget how their children will look in old age, if the process of life is to continue.

In stanza VI, he mocks at the greatest philosophers of the world in a mood of light-hearted gaiety. Plato, the great Greek philosopher, regarded the world as unreal, as a mere shadow or reflection of the world of ideas. Aristotle, on the other hand, was a practical man of action. He was the tutor of Alexander the Great, and as such he must have often whipped the king of kings. His philosophy is more realistic, practical, and weighty, but Alexander learned little from him. Another great philosopher was

Pythagoras who gave out that he was 'Golden-thighed'. He was himself a great musician and could listen to the 'music of the spheres' or the musical sound produced by the planets as they moved in their orbits. But all the profound wisdom of these great philosophers was of no avail to them. It could not check the natural process of ageing. Despite their philosophies, they became old and broken, like a scarecrow, with the passing of time. None can fight against time ; to mourn the loss of youth and beauty is futile. "The sudden descent, from the romantic phrasing of the fifth, sixth, and seventh lines, to the racy, earthy idiom of 'old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird' is dramatic use of language, which delivers judgment by changing the perspective" (*Stock*). As *G. S. Fraser* puts it, great philosophers do not impress Yeats. They all labour under dillusions and try to escape reality.

The poet continues to reflect on the manifold illusions fostered by the human spirit. Passionate lovers, affectionate mothers, and pious nuns, all worship illusions, mere phantoms. Their adoration of cherised images blinds them to the harshness of reality. The beloveds are never so good and beautiful as they are imagined, sons never so dutiful and handsome, and the gods never so just and merciful. Still this image-worship, this worsihp of illusions goes on. As a matter of fact, these images symbolise glorious ideals which man set before him, but which he is never able to attain. These ideals mock at all human efforts to attain them. They are mockeries of the heart, just as great philosophies are mockeries of the mind. None of them can alter the facts of life or influence the course of nature. Despite them, youth and beauty must perish. The last stanza is the forceful statement of the oft repeated Yeatsian doctrine that life is a unity, an organic whole made up of opposites. Just as the chestnut tree is neither leaf, blossom or bole, but the creative unity of all three, so also man is neither mind nor body nor soul, but an organic unity of the three. Life becomes really fruitful, and labour is really rewarding, when the body is not bruised or sacrificed for the good of the soul and when the diligence of the scholar does not make him

"blear eyed". Just as the dancer cannot be separated from the dance, so also the body cannot be separated from the soul. Harmony between the two is essential for self-fulfilment, for the blossoming of the tree of life.

Yeats called this poem, "a curse upon the old age." But it is neither a curse upon old age nor a justification of it. "What it offers is not a solution but a response, and the opposition it presents between youth and age, the ideal and the actual, man's nobility and man's absurdity, are presented as roots of the blossoming conviction that without contraries there can be no life" the poem is an expression of Yeats' recognition that every condition demands its opposite. and that truth cannot be known unless it is lived.

*Ledaean body*—'Ledaean' adjective from 'Leda', the Mother of Helen in Greek mytholgy. The expression, therefore, means classical beauty, like that of Helen of Troy.

*Daughters of the swan*—beautiful woman like Helen who was born as a result of the copulation of the god Zeus in the form of a swan with Leda. (See "*Leda and the Swan*").

*Paddler's heritage*—characteristic of common, ordinary, women. The word 'Paddler' carries an overtone of contempt.

*Had pretty plumage once*—was once young and handsome.

*Spume*—unsubstantial, like froth.

*Ghostly*—unreal ; shadowy.

*Paradigm*—a show ; a mere imitation.

*Of things*—of reality.

*Played the taws*—whipped.

*Solider*—more weighty than plato. Some critics read the word as "soldier" in the sense of 'practical'

*Golden-thighed Pythagoras*—Plutarch is the source of the story that the great Greek philosopher had "golden-thighs"

*Images*—illusions ; phantoms.

*Presence*—images ; idols.

*Bole*—the trunk of a tree.

## BYZANTIUM

### Interpretation

*Byzantium* was written as a sequel to *Sailing to Byzantium* after an interval of three years. Yeats said that he wrote the second poem in order to throw light on the first one and make it explicable. But as it is, *Sailing to Byzantium* explains itself, while *Byzantium* remains a very difficult poem, if not an obscure one. Byzantium, of course, was the capital of the Eastern wing of the Holy Roman empire. It was known for its mosaic work and gold enamelling. It was a reputed centre of art and cluture. But in the poem *Byzantium* is no real city, but a "country of the mind", a transcendental place outside Time and space. It is beyond the world.

THE unpurged images of day recede ;
The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed ;
Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song
After great cathedral gong ;
A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,

All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins.
Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a shade ;
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path ;
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
Breathless mouths may summon ;
I hail the superhuman ;
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the star-lit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood.

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
Where blood begotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave,
Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
Spirit after spirit.' The smithies break the flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor !
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,
Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin- torn, that gong-tormented sea.

1930.

*Byzantium*, in five stanzas of eight lines each, is one of the finest as well as one of the difficult poems ever penned by Yeats. It opens with a description of Byzantium riotous revelry. It is night and peace prevails for the moment. The gong of the great Byzantium church has sounded, thus signifying the end of the day and its activity. During the day there had been much drunken revelry, but now all are abed. Even the drunken soldiers of the king have retired to their rest. The echoes of daylight revelry and its 'unpurged' images have all faded way. Even the sounds characteristic of the night are dying away. There is only the majestic dome of the Cathedral, dimly lit only by starlight or moonlight, looking down contemptuously

on the mere complexities of human nature, and the fury and mire in human veins. 'Mire' refers, to the physical process of birth and death signifying man's kinship with clay, 'fury' to his passion and violence, and 'complexity' to the 'quality' or 'dichotomy' of his nature. The 'dome', the key-image in the stanza, is symbolic of the greatness of Byzantium architecture.

Thus in the first stanza the poet has described the present condition of Byzantium, its drunken soldiery, its blood and mire, and the peace which apparently descends upon the scene at night. In the second stanza he invokes the past and dead. The peace at nightful is deceptive, for the sounding of the gong is a summons, so to say, to the spirit of the dead to come out of their graves. The poet sees an image moving before him, but he is not sure, whether it is a man or a ghost. This very indefiniteness intensifies the atmosphere of mystery. The entire place seems to be possessed by spirits. 'Hades' Bobbin, 'bound in mummy-cloth,' suggesting both the dead and the ageing, offers a means of unwinding the thread of time. The souls unwind the memories of their earthly existence *i. e.* re-live in memory their earlier lives, and in this way re-suffer the earlier agonies. They thus seek purification through suffering. These ghostly, super-human beings are quite different from the human, for they have a month without moisture and without breath. But as life and death are the two aspects of the same truth, so the human and the super-human are also closely inter-related. This inter-relationship is emphasised by the last line "Death-in-life" and "life-in-death'. The readers are put in mind of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*.

One of these ghostly creatures leads the poet to a mechanical golden bird on a star-lit golden bough. In this way, we are reminded of the grandeur of Byzantium art and craftsmanship. The ghosts are proverbially associated with the crowing of cocks, and so, the poet is reminded of 'Hades' 'cock' which wakes up the ghostly inmates of the under-world. The golden bird is immortal : it has the eternity and purity of art, and as such, like the dome in

the first stanza, it disdains human complexities of blood and mire. The purity of art and its eternity is contrasted with the impure 'unpurged' human condition and its transcience.

The fourth stanza of the poem has been usually regarded as obscure and inexplicable. However, all obscurity is removed if we keep in mind the celebrated passage in Homer's epic, *The Odyssey* in which Odysseus visits the under world and spirits gather round him to taste the blood of the sacrificed victims. The spirits are 'blood-begotten'. The emperors mosaic pavement at night is a spirit-haunted place. A fire fed by no fuel burns there at night, and it is in this fire that the spirits purify themselves by dancing in it without being burnt. It is a purgatorial fire, it is a dance of agony they dance, and in this way seek purification from all complexity and fury through self-expiation. The fire is a mystic one : it cannot, "singe even a sleeve" ; it is the fire which exists in the minds of the sinners. Purification must be sought through suffering, through an ordeal of fire. Then alone can the human spirit be at rest.

"The Dolphins with their mire and blood in the last verse", says *Stock*, "are living bodies on which spirits ride to Byzantium across the sea of time". The poet, as it were, stands on the shores of Byzantium and surveys the scene around. Like an advancing army, spirit after spirit arrives on the shores riding on the backs of Dolphins. The sea is all tumult but it is checked and controlled by the smithies of the emperor. Thus the superiority of art over nature is emphasised. Similarly, 'furies of complexity' in the souls of the dead are controlled by their dance of purification on the marble pavements of Byzantium. Images beget images in endless confusion ; they can be hammered into form and order by art. The sea, torn by Dolphins, and tormented by the sound of the gong, suggests, says *F.A.C. Wilson*, that man's life is split asunder by passion and desire and is endlessly tormented by the idea of death. "The magnificent last line," says *B. Rajan*, 'which guides the poem into its stormy peace,

suggests through the embattled force of 'torn' and 'tormented' how man's life is split asunder by forces which he cannot evade, but to which he cannot surrender without denying his nature. Man remains suspended between flesh and spirit, and cannot choose either without ceasing to be man."

In short, the poem emphasises the need for suffering and purification, and a sense of the surpassing superiority of art in which the poet seeks anchorage. It is a very rich and intricate poem and each successive reading reveals new significance and new layers of meaning. Its complexities are endless and so equally endless are the interpretations its has received at the hands of critics.

## LAPIS LAZULI

(*for Harry Clifton*)

**Introduction**

Lapis Lazuli is a kind of precious blue stone. The lapis lazuli referred to in this poem belonged to Yeats. As the poet himself tells us in a letter to *Dorothy Wellesley* some one had, "sent me a present of a great piece carved by some chinese sculptor into a semblance of a mountain, with temple, trees, paths, and an ascetic and pupil about to climb the mountain." This lapis lazuli carved by some chinese sculptor is the subject of the present poem included in *the Last Poems and Plays.*

I HAVE heard that hysterical women say
They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow,
Of poets that are always gay,
For everybody knows or else should know
That if nothing drastic is done
Aeroplane and Zeppeline will come out,
Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in
Until the town lie beaten flat.

All perform their tragic play,
There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
That's Ophelia, that Cordelia ;
Yet they, should the last scene be there,

The great stage curtain about to drop,
If worthy their prominent part in the play,
Do not break up their lines to weep.
They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay.
Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.
All men have aimed at, found and lost ;
Black out ; Heaven blazing into the head :
Tragedy wrought to its uttermost.
Though Hamlet rambles and Lear rages,
And all the drop-scenes drop at once
Upon a hundred thousand stages,
It cannot grow by an inch or an ounce.

On their own feet they come, or on shipboard,
Camel-back, horse-back, ass-back, mule-back,
Old civilisations put to the sword.
Then they and their wisdom went to rack ;
No handiwork of Callimachus,
Who handled marble as if it were bronze,
Made draperies that seemed to rise
When sea-wind swept the corner, stands ;
His long lamp-chimney shaped like the stem
Of a slender palm, stood but a day ;
All things fall and are built again,
And those that build them again are gay.

Two Chinamen, behind them a third,
Are carved in lapis lazuli,
Over them flies a long-legged bird,
A symbol of longevity ;
The third, doubtless a serving-man,
Carries a musical instrument.

Every discoloration of the stone.
Every accidental crack or dent,
Seems a water-course or an avalanche,
Or lofty slope where it still snows
Though doubtless plum or cherry-branch
Sweetens the little half-way house
Those Chinamen climb towards, and I
Delight to imagine them seated there ;
There, on the mountain and the sky,

On all the tragic scene they stare.
One asks for mournful melodies ;
Accomplished fingers begin to play.
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.

**Stanza 1 : Substance**

The poet refers to the war-hysteria which possessed all Europe in the thirtees. The memories of the first world war and its ravages were still fresh and the people were terrified at the mere thought of a second world war. Yet war-preparation were on and the air was charged with suspense and anxiety. Nervous, terrified people, like hysterical women, were disgusted with the fine arts, as painting, music and poetry. The Arts could be of no good to them. They could not save them from the impending horror. The gaiety of the artist offended them, for it struck a jarring note in that time of crisis. Drastic and urgent measures were needed to prevent the outbreak of the war. If immediate steps were not taken, bombardment from the air would destroy their towns and cities, and make life impossible.

*Palette*—the plate on which a painter puts and mixes his colours.

*Zeppelin*—a cigar-shaped aeroplane.

*Pitch*—drop. *Bomb balls*—incendiary bombs first used during World War I.

**Stanza 2 : Substance**

In this stanza, the poet commends the study of the fine arts to a generation oppressed by war-hysteria. The arts are not useless ; it is the arts alone which can enable us to face the tragic reality, bravely and heroically. We are all actors in a tragic drama, and we must play our parts bravely, and continue to act undisturbed upto the last. A great tragedian, who may be acting the tragic role of Ophelia, or Cordelia, or of Lear or Hamlet, continues to act his part upto the very end when the final catastrophe

takes place and the curtain drops. He never breaks down into tears, not even in the horrible last scene, which depicts the death of the tragic hero and heroine. As a matter of fact, for a really great actor the very zest of acting brings its own pleasure, even though his role is one of dire tragedy. His joy in his art and the aesthetic pleasure which it brings him transforms horror itself into gaiety. Moreover, human life has always been tragic : man has always suffered, found and lost. Utter darkness, the darkness of tragedy and misfortune, has surrounded him in all ages, but this very terror of reality has been the source of wisdom and profound philosophy. Inner illumination comes out of terror and real life begins only when its tragedy is recognised and accepted. Art has always represented the tragedy of human life, and a study of art, therefore, is conducive to an understanding of life's reality. The uttermost tragedy has been wrought by the arts. No doubt, in recent times, there has been a great advance in the techniques of horror. Hamlet and Lear enact their tragic roles all over the modern world. To-day, the tragedy is world-wide, and the drop curtain is likely to drop all at once "upon a hundred thousand stages" *i. e.*, the entire humanity is likely to be engulfed in a world-wide conflaguration. But this intensification and multiplication of horror does in no way lessen the validity and significance of the artist's understanding of the human predicament, and his expression of it in his art. At all times, great artists have realised in their respective arts the extremes of tragedy and suffering, and hence the arts are valid even to-day when the zero hour seems to be so close.

*Do not break.........weep*—continue to enact their roles upto the very last. They do not break down weeping.

*Gaity.........dread*—the very zest which an actor has for his role transforms even tragedy into gaiety. The aesthetic pleasure an artist derives from the pursuit of his art makes him gay even when his subject is essentially tragic.

*All men have.........lost*—human life is essentially tragic. It has always been so in all ages and countries.

*Black out* : *Heaven ............ head*—a confrontation of opposites in the characteristic Yeatsian manner. The acceptance of the external horrors of the human scene results in inner illumination. Profound philosophy comes out of an understanding of life's tragic reality.

*It cannot........ ounce*—human lot has always been utterly and extremely tragic, and a mere multiplication of horrors cannot increase this tragedy even a whit.

**Stanza 3 : Substance**

As the wheel of history moves on, civilisations are born, mature and decay, and new civilisations are born out of the ruins of the old ones. This cyclic process of history is described through the use of highly pictorial and vivid imagery. The invading hoards arrive on ships, camels, horses, asses and mules and destroy old civilisations. The invaders and their wisdom, too, are destroyed in course of time. No phase of human civilisation lives for ever. Even such perfect works of arts as those of Callimachus are short lived and transient. Destruction and reconstruction are the eternal laws of nature. The artist knows that what he creates is ephemeral, but the very act of creation, his enthusiasm for his art, ever keeps the artist gay and cheerful.

*Callimachus*—a profound scholar, critic and sculptor of the Hellenistic period (3rd century B.C.)

*Went to rack*—decayed and fell to pieces.

*Draperies*—the representation of the clothing or dress of human figures in sculpture and painting.

*His long lamp-chimney....... palm*—a fine description of the beauty and delicacy of a piece of sculpture representing a lamp chimney, as delicate and fine as the long, thin stem of a palm leaf.

**Stanza 4 : Substance**

Having given an account of the war-hysteria and panic that swept contemporary Europe, the poet turns to the lapis lazuli in his possession. This Chinese piece of carved stone shows three human figures. Two of them are China-

men—an ascetic and his disciple—and the third one who follows them carries a musical instrument. This shows that he is their servant. Over the three, flies a long-legged bird—an auspicious bird whose presence over-head indicates that the three figures would enjoy a long life.

**Stanza 5 : Substance**

Continuing with the description of the delicate carvings on the lapis lazuli, the poet notices a mountain slope on which various discolourations of the stone and accidental cracks represent flowing streams or water-falls or snow-fall. Half-way up the slop there is a rest house surrouned by plum trees and cherry bushes. Its setting is sweet and pleasant. The Chinamen climb towards this pleasant rest house and the poet imagines them comfortably seated there. From there point of vantage high on the mountain they survey the tragic scene around. One of them desires that some sweet mournful song be sung, and the skilful artist who carries the musical instrument begins to play. The eyes of the two Chinese listeners shine brightly in their wrinkled faces, and they are gay, despite the tragic scene around them. Thus art can keep people happy even in the midst of dire tragedy.

**Interpretation**

'*Lapis Lazuli*, a fine poem, was inspired by a chinese piece of carved stone presented to Yeats by a friend. The poem begins with an account of the war-phoebia and panic that swept across Europe during the years 1934-1939. It was a time of deepening frustration and the foreknowledge that war, more destructive than the first one, was in the offing. The circle of terror and violence was widening, and people were waiting for air-raids and incendiary bombs with horror in their hearts. They were nervous and hysterical, like women. It was generally felt that the fine arts like poetry, painting and music are of no good in such tragic times. The gaiety of poets and artists, jarred upon their nerves and seemed to be out of place in the tragic times in which they lived. What they needed was not art, but some darstic steps to prevent the outbreak of

the second world war. If drastic steps were not taken, the war will break out, tragedy will be let loose and bombardment and air-raids will ruin the country. However, the poet is impatient with such hysterical people and. "The aggressive crudity of the verse in the first lines expresses his impatience" (*Stock*).

Having given an account of the panic caused by the fear of war, the poet proceeds to point out that the world is a tragic drama, and great actors should play their part in it upto the last scene without breaking down. There should be no weeping, no panic, no hysteric outbursts, but like a great artist, perfect self-control and devotion to the part which one is playing in the drama of life. Indeed, it is the zest of an actor in his art which makes him gay even when playing a tragic role ; so also a man should live his life with zest, and this zest for life would make him happy even in the midst of tragedy. The creative joy of the artist can transform tragedy itself into gaiety. As Yeats wrote in his *Introduction to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, "In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies", and further, "in Greece the tragic chorus danced". Profoundest philosophy comes out of tragedy : total external blackout results in internal illumination. As Shelley puts it, our sweetest songs are those that tell of our saddest thoughts. Art is valid even in times of tragedy, for art teaches self-control. Art such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, etc, has time and again represented the extremes of human suffering and tragedy—"Tragedy wrought to it uttermost"—and the tragedy cannot be increased merely by the size of the theatre or the number of actors, even if.

*All the drop-scenes drop at once*
*Upon a hundred thousand stages.*

Even a threatened world-wide conflagaration cannot intensify the tragedy of human life. No doubt, today we have made immense progress in the technique of destruction—incendiary bombs, and bombartment from the air etc., but this in itself does not invalidate the understanding of

human life and the representation of its tragedy already achieved by art.

Birth-death-re-birth, destruction and re-construction, is the eternal law of nature. History tells us that civilisations have been born, have decayed, and finally died out. Hoots of invaders have come, sooner or later, and have put to the sword old civilisations, and their wisdom. The coming of the invaders has been described in a vivid pictorial language. Lines such as "*Camel-back, horse-back, ass-back, mule-back*" have a processional quality and the repeti tion suggests history's cyclic re-enactments. Even glorious works of art, like those of Callimachus, have perished. Nothing has escapad the destructive rage of time. But there is no need to despair. The process of history is a cyclic one, and what has been must be once again. There is an aesthetic poise of the destructive and the constructive in,

*All things fall and are bui lt again*
*And those that built them again are gay.*

This is the message of all art' and hence its utility even in times of greatest tragedy.

Having examined the hysteria and panic of the contemporary scene, and the validity of art even in times of intense tragedy, the poet comes to the piece of lapis lazuli in question and gives an occount of the scene carved on it. It shows two Chinamen going ahead followed by a third, a servant with a musical instrument. Accidental cracks and discolouration on the stone look like a stream or an avalanche. There is a lofty hill on which half-way up is a rest-house. It is surrounded by plum or cherry trees which give it a pleasant look. The Chinamen climb to the rest-house and seated comfortably there, survey the tragic scene around them. The servant plays a mournful tune, and their "glittering eyes", then eyes in their ancient wrinkled facts, are gay. The repetition of the word, 'eye', and the use of the words 'wrinkles' and 'ancient' has a distancing effect suggesting the detachment of art. "Tragedy does

not cease to be tragedy, but it is seen differently from the hill of the Muses" It is art which revives and keeps up our enthusiasm for life in tragic times, when life seems to be meaningless. Yeats' poetry has been criticised for its "cold inhumanity", for its lack of human feeling, and the last lines of the poem certainly bear out this contention. To a war-torn Europe, these lines must have sounded strangely unfeeling and cold. Another criticism of Yeats' poetry is that it lacks contemporaneity. As *D. S. Savage* points out Yeats' rendering of the horrors of a modern war in the opening stanza of the poem is entirely unsatisfactory : he is much happier when he is describing the carving on the lapis lazuli.

However, it may be, the poet succeeds in his purpose : that of establishing the validity of art in times of crisis. Profounded philosophy results from terror, and life begins only when it is recognised as tragedy. *Dr. Buchchan* rightly emphasises that Yeats' philosophy is not one of despair and pessimism. Art is a source of cheerfulness and gaiety, belief in the "cyclic process" of history brings consolation in the midst of despair.

## THE MAGI

**Introduction**

In another eight line poem, *The Magi*, the poet has given a vision of "the pale unsatisfied ones". On the birth of Christ, it is said that the Wise Men of the East (*The Magi*) had come from the East to adore Him ; in His coming they had seen the promise of a new age.

Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,
In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.

**Explanation**

To the poet it seems that age came and left them unsatisfied; so that in his vision, the poet sees them "appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky"; they are on the look out for another 'avatar'—the divinity (uncontrollable mystery) on the earth (the bestial floor) as they are not satisfied with what Christianity accomplished. Calvary, the place of outside Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified, has evidently not met their hopes and aspirations. In his capacity as a seer and thinker, Yeats had reason to believe that a new dispensation, a new order, a new cycle in the world, history was on the way. Whether on that level the uneasiness of the Magi was to have any marked effect is not easy to see; but the poet himself was certainly heading towards a new stage in his career, to be heralded by his marriage, not to the object of his lifelong devotion, but to the less interesting but more important for his development, Miss Hyde-Less in 1917.

Meanwhile, the poet had his fling. There had been developed in his "a new robustness; there is the tooth of satire which is . . . . . . too good a tooth to keep hidden. There are a lot of fools to be killed and Mr. Yeats is an exultant slaughter-master, when he will but turn from ladies with excessive chevelure appearing in pearl-pale nuances". (Ezra Pound). He had learnt his craft; he had picked up metallic hardness; he had a style; and what is much more important, he had perfected a way of looking at life from which he could speak with authority and ease. This was to have come a long way from the *Shadowy Waters* and the *Lake Isle of Innisfree.*

## MEDITATIONS IN TIME OF CIVIL WAR

### I

### Ancestral Houses

SURELY among a rich man's flowering lawns,
Amid the rustle of his planted hills,
Life overflows without ambitious pains;
And rains down life until the basin spills,

And mounts more dissy high the more it rains
As though to choose whatever shape it wills
And never stoop to a mechanical
Or servile shape, at other's beck and call.

Mere dreams, mere dreams ! Yet Homer had not sung
Had he not found it certain beyond dreams
That out of life's own self-delight had sprung
The abounding glittering jet ; though now it seems
As if some marvellous empty sea-shall flung
Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams,
And not a fountain, were the symbol which
Shadows the inherited glory of the rich.

Some violent bitter man, some powerful man
Called architect and artist in, that they,
Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone
The sweetness that all longed for night and day,
The gentleness none there had ever known ;
But when the master's buried mice can play,
And maybe the great-grandson of that house,
For all its bronze and marble, 's but a mouse.

O what if gardens where the peacock strays
With delicate feet upon old terraces,
Or else all Juno from an urn displays
Before the indifferent garden deities ;
O what if levelled lawns and gravelled ways
Where slippered Contemplation finds his ease
And Childhood a delight for every sense,
But take our greatness with our violence,

What if the glory of escutcheoned doors,
And buildings that a haughtier age designed,
The pacing to and fro on polished floors
Amid great chambers and long galleries, lined
With famous portraits of our ancestors ;
What if those things the greatest of mankind
Consider most to magnify, or to bless,
But take our greatness with our bitterness ?

## II

## My House

An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower,
A farmhouse that is sheltered by its wall,
An acre of stony ground,
Where the symbolic rose can break in flower,
Old regged elms, old thorns innumerable,
The sound of the rain or sound
Of every wind that blows ;
The stilted water-hen
Crossing stream again
Scared by the splashing of a dozen cows ;

A winding stair, a chamber arched with stone,
A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth,
A candle and written page.
*Il Penseroso's* Platonist toiled on
In some like chamber, shadowing forth
How the daemonic rage
Imagined everything.
Benighted travellers
From markets and from fairs
Have seen his midnight candle glimmering.

Two man have founded here. A man-at-arms
Gathered a score of horse and spent his days
In this tumultuous spot,
Where through long wars and sudden night alarms
His dwindling score and he seemed castaways
Forgetting and forgot ;
And I, that after me
My bodily heirs may find,
To exalt a lonely mind,
Befitting emblems of adversity.

## III

## My Trble

Two heavy trestles, and a board
Where Sato's gift, a changeless sword,
By pen and paper lies,
That it may moralise,

My days out of their aimlessness.
A bit of an embroidered dress
Covers its wooden sheath.
Chaucer had not drawn breath

When it was forged. In Sato's house
Curved like new moon, moon-luminous,
It lay five hundred years
Yet if no change appears
No moon ; only an aching heart
Conceives a changeless work of art.
Our learned men have urged
That when and where 'twas forged
A marvellous accomplishment,
In painting or in pottery, went
From father unto son
And through the centuries ran
And seemed unchanging like the sword.

Soul's beauty being most adored,
Men and their business took
The soul's unchanging look ;
For the most rich inheritor,
Knowing that none could pass Heaven's door
That loved inferior art,
Had such an aching heart
That he, although a country's talk
For silken clothes and stately walk,
Had waking wits ; it seemed
Juno's peacock screamed.

## IV

### My Descendants

Heaving inherited a vigorous mind
From my old fathers, I must nourish dreams
And leave a woman and a man behind
As vigorous of mind, and yet it seems
Life scarce can cast a fragrance on the wind,
Scarce spread a glory to the morning beams,
But the torn petal strew the garden plot ;
And there's but common greenness after that.

And what if my descendants lose the flower
Through natural declension of the soul,
Through too much business with the passing hour,
Through too much play, or marriage with a fool ?
May this laborious stair and this stark tower
Become a roofless ruin that the owl
May build in the cracked masonry and cry
Her desolation to the desolate sky.

The Primum Mobile that fashioned us
Has made the very owls in circles move ;
And I, that count myself most prosperous,
Seeing that love and friendship are enough
For an old neighbour's friendship chose the house
And decked and altered it for a girl's love,
And know whatever flourish and decline
These stones remain their monument and mine.

V

### The road at my door

An affable Irregular,
A heavily-built Falstaffian man,
Comes cracking jokes of civil war
As though to die by gunshot were
The finest play under the sun.

A brown Lieutenant and his men,
Half dressed in national uniform,
Stand at my door, and I complain
Of the foul weather, hail and rain,
A pear-tree broken by the storm.

I count those feathered balls of soot
The moor-hen guides upon the stream,
To silence the envy in my thoughts ;
And turn towards my chamber, caught
In the cold snows of a dream.

VI

### The Stare's nest by my window

The bees build in the crevices
Of loosening masonry, and there

The mother birds bring grubs and flies.
My wall is loosening ; honey-bees,
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

We are closed in, and the key is turned
On our uncertainty ; somewhere
A man is killed, or a house burned,
Yet no clear fact to be discerned :
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

A barricade of stone or of wood ;
Some fourteen days of civil war ;
Last night they trundled down the road
That dead young soldier in his blood ;
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

We had fed the heart on fantasies,
The heart's grown brutal from the fare ;
More substance in our enemities
Than in our love ; O honey-bees,
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

## VII

### I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness

I climb to the tower-top and lean upon broken stone,
A mist that is like blown snow is sweeping over all,
Valley, river, and elms, under the light of a moon
That seems unlike itself, that seems unchangeable,
A glittering sword out of the east. A puff of wind
And those white glimmering fragments of the mist sweep by.
Frenzies bewilder, reveries perturb the mind ;
Monstrous familiar images swim to the mind's eye.

'Vengeance upon the murderers, 'the cry goes up,
'Vengeance for Jacques Molay.' In cloud-pale rage, or in lace,
The rage-driven, rage-tormented, and rage-hungry troop,

Trooper belabouring trooper, biting at arm or at face,
Plunges towards nothing, arms and fingers spreading wide
For the embrace of nothing ; and I, my wits astray
Because of all that senseless tumult, all but cried
For vengeance on the murderers of Jacques Molay.

Their legs long, delicate and slender, aquamarine their eyes,
Magical unicorns bear ladies on their backs.
The ladies close their musing eyes. No prophecies,
Remembered out of Babylonian almanacs,
Haven closed the ladies' eyes, their minds are but a pool
Where even longing drowns under its own excess ;
Nothing but stillness can remain when hearts are full
Of their own sweetness, bodies of their loveliness.

The cloud-pale unicorns, the eyes of aquamarine,
The quivering half closed eyelids, the rage of cloud or of lace,
Or eyes that rage has brightened, arms it has made lean,
Give place to an indifferent multitude, give place
To brazen hawks. Nor self-delighting reverie,
Nor hate of what's to come, nor pity for what's gone,
Nothing but grip of claw, and the eye's complacency,
The innumerable clanging wings that have put out the moon

I turn away and shut the door, and on the stair
Wonder how many times I could have proved my worth
In comething that all others understand or share ;
But O ! ambitions heart, had such a proof drawn forth

A company of friends, a conscience set at ease,
It had but made us pine the more. The abstract joy,
The half-read wisdom of daemonic images,
Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy.
1923.

## THE WILD SWANS AT COOLE

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky ;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine and fifty swans.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count ;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

# CRITICAL OPINIONS

# 22

## *Select Literary Criticism*

### (a) Opinion of Critics

(1)

The mythology which Yeats used extensively in his early poems was the great body of Gaelic heroic legend which had been presented to English readers of the late eighteenth century in the faked prose 'epics' of *Ossian* by the Scottish schoolmaster Macpherson, and which was available for a young poet a hunderd years later in the more scholarly and authentic versions published by standish O'Grady and Douglas Hyde. This mythology had never been wholly forgotten in Ireland and for the young Yeats it had the fascination that Greek Mythology had for the men of the Renaissance. For him it was no mere antiquarianism but something which he wholly absorbed and made part of his imaginative life as Milton absorbed the Hebrew sagas and Keats the Greek myths. 'Might I not ; he wrote, 'with health and good luck to aid me, create some new *Prometheus Unbound*, Patrick or Columbkell, Ossian or Finn in Prometheus' stead, and instead, of Caucasus, Cro-Patrick of Ben Bulben ?' This ambition to treat heroic themes on a large-scale was very different from the spirit of the English Rhymers with their concentration on shot, highly wrought poems. *—Pinto*

(2)

'With knowing it', he (Yeats) declared, 'I had come to care for nothing but impersonal beauty. I had set out on life with the thought of putting my very self into poetry, and had understood this a representation of my own vision and an attempt to cut away the non-essential, but as I imagined the visions outside myself, my imagination became full of decorative landscape and of still life......The more I tried to make my art deliberately beautiful the more did I follow the opposite of myself. Presently I found that I entered into myself and pictured myself and not some essence, when I was not seeking beauty at all, but merely to lighten my mind of some burden of love or bitterness thrown upon it by the events of life". Now, to attain style, mastery, that dignity and that lofty and severe quality *Verlaine* spoke of, he saw that, we should ascend out of common interest, the thoughts of the newspapers, of the market place, of men, of science, but only so far as we can carry the normal, passionate, reasoning self, the personality as a whole.' He still held that all art is dream,' but it was now a representation of the waking dream of life, not merely of racial memories. Banished were the indistinct meandering emotions the sophisticated heroism. He turned to face with growing bitterness an Ireland no longer filled with fairies.

—*R. A. Scott-James*

(3)

Spoken syntax is expressed in time, not space. A voice can vary the length of its pauses, for which punctuation is a clumsy measurement, and its pace, which has no direct notation on paper, and its stress and tone, which can change the point of a sentence or the meaning of a word : with all these resources a speaker will of often jump verble links, leaving out pronouns, relatives and conjunctions, without loss of precision. Writing translates speech from the ear to the eye, and a man writing to be read must put all this meaning into the order of words and the accuracy of his connectives, so that his

sentences are bound to flow differently. Good talk is learnt from good talkers: 'to speak like a book', the semi-literate men's ambition, is to miss the most vital resources of speech in a stilled imitation of an imitation. Living thought is a mind thinking, not an abstration from a mind; it is in motion, and since words are speech first of all speech syntax follows its movement more closely than written prose. When the thought is most spontaneous and the relation between the speaker and hearers most unstudied, the speech is most alive.

Yeats rightly says that this is more important than a simple vocabulary. Studied simplicity can be as artificial as studied grandiloquence: either falls short of poetic good manners by offering the reader something other than the respect due to an equal, and either way the unnatural vocabulary will make the phrasing move unnaturally as surely as bodily movements are cramped by ill-fitting clothes. 'Ease of soul' only comes when the language is natural between the speaker and the hearer, so that its reception may be taken for granted and all that need be studied is its precision in relation to the moving thought.

(4)

Few modern poets can sing, or care to except in rare snatches, mostly satiric: perhaps most of them would say that the simplicity of song excludes the complicated thoughts and emotions which burden our age. Yet the thought in both of these, and the vocabulary in the first, is abstruse, and the feeling though poignant is too equivocal to be given a name. They sing or chant themselves from sheer rightness of sound. The content is more intricate and the expression barer than that of the lyrics in *The Wind Among the Reeds*, and the lyrical tune is in no way imposed, but grows from the words themselves. The lightness of song comes not so much from simplicity as from a kind of assurance, when the tongue finds speech for what is believed in the bones, whether or not it echoes a common faith. This assurance distinguishes Yeats from nearly all his contemporaries: as he aged his thought grew

lonelier and more recondite, but his power of song increased.

—*Stock*

( 5 )

To call Yeats a great poet is no longer daring, but the word needs explanation when it is used of a near-contemporary who has not yet had his chance of oblivion. Greatness is not measurable on a scale, for in every great poet it is something different, but neither is it a mere subjective expression of approval. Most of us take it on trust, to begin with, that *Homer*, *Dante* and *Shakespeare* are great poets ; most of us agree with the judgment by conviction as our understanding deepens. This is so, even if we spend more of our spare time with other writers, for to recognize greatness is not the same as feeling at home with it.

—*Stock*

( 6 )

The Irish fairies of Yeats are not, like the fairies of the ordinary fairy-story, merely smaller human beings like ourselves, possessed of special supernatural powers : they are a different order of beings altogether, existing, as it were, in different dimension. This strangeness, this real other-worldiness of the fairyland of Yeat's poetry, derives partly, no doubt, it would appear, from the fascinating anthology of Irish fairy-tales which Yeats complied and edited, from Irish folk-lore itself. The Sidhe were the natural creation of the dreaming and mocking Irish mind amid the illusory uncertain lights and mists of the Irish countryside. But Yeats has made of this Irish fairyland something which puts upon us a stronger spell than the spell even of the folk-tales in his anthology. Yeats' fairyland has become a symbol for the imagination itself.

—*Edmund Wilson*

( 7 )

But just as Yeats' early poetry presents the fascination of fairyland as something inimical to life in the real

world, so these stories of the life of ecstatic revelry, unlike the typical writings of the *fin de siecle* aesthetes, are edged with a consciousness of dangers and temptations inescapably involved in such a life. In Yeats, we find the aestheticism of Pater carried through to its consequences. What is the consequence of living for beauty was then understood, of cultivating the imagination, the enjoyment of aesthetic sensations, as a supreme end in itself? We shall be thrown fatally out of key with reality—we shall incur penalties which are not to be taken lightly. There is a conflict here which cannot be evaded ; and Yeats, even in his earliest period, is unceasingly aware of this conflict.

—*Edmund Wilson*

(8)

In his search for a compensating tradition Yeats went first to romantic literature, and then to mysticism of one kind and another, to folklore, theosophy, spiritualism, neo-Platonism, and finally elaborated a symbolic system of his own, based on a variety of sources, and in terms of this he was able to give pattern and coherence to the expression of his thought. It was a search for a system rather than a search for a set of beliefs : he sought a mode of expression rather than a set of dogmas to express. The problem for Yeats was not that of finding what he ought to say ; his sensitive and restless mind provided him with a constant supply of subjects and attitudes.

—*David Daiches*

(9)

When Yeats first began writing poetry, he accepted as a matter of course the thinned-out romantic tradition which demanded that poetry should be concerned with a "beautiful" world of dream, employing a language chosen for its vague emotional suggestiveness and conventional poetic associations. He had at this period no clear ideas concerning his relation to his Irish background ; the influences on him were English rather than Irish, and in his treatment of Irish themes he displayed the normal English

romantic attitude toward things Celtic. But even in this earliest period his thin poetizing seems to have meant more to Yeats than the conventional practice of a craft ; the images of beauty and strangeness which he collected out of Spenser and Shelley and other less distinguished influences were intended in some vague way to represent an imaginative world of values which would compensate him both for his lost religion and for the confused and prosaic nature of everyday existence. He was already seeking his, "infallible church of poetic tradition." But he had as yet no thought of a system ; his church was to be built on the romantic world, compensating for the grayness of contemporary reality. —*David Daiches*

( 10 )

His poetry is little more than a marginal comment on the main activities of his life. No one can read his *Autobiographies* and his *Essays* without being struck by the magnificent qualities of intelligence and character he exhibits. His insight shows itself in his analysis of his own case, an analysis that suggests at the same time the complete achievement he was fated to miss. "In literature," he wrote in 1906, "partly from the lack of that spoken word which knits us to the normal man, we have lost in personality, in our delight in the whole man—blood, imagination, intellect, running together—but have found a new delight in essences, in states of mind, in pure imagination, in all that comes to us most easily in elaborate music." And we find him remarking in *Autobiographies*, "how small a fragment of our own nature can be brought to perfect expression, nor that even but with great toil, in a much divided civilisation." Again, by quoting his own verse, he explicitly relates the general reflection to his own case : "Nor did I understand as yet how little that Unity (of Being), however, wisely sought, is possible without a Unity of Culture in class or people that is no longer possible at all." —*F.R. Leavis*

( 11 )

What one admires in Yeats' poetry is, in fact, not its mystery, its magic or even its atmosphere ; but its passion,

its humanity, its occasional marvellous lucidity, its technical mastery, its integrity, its strength, its reality and its opportunism. —*Stephen Spender*

( 12 )

And Yeats' poetry, it seems to me, is one which, though it compels our admiration, contains an element (or the absence of such which prevents us from finding a place for it close to our heart. It is too remote, both too characteristic and too impersonal; it is, again, for want of a better word, too inhuman. We can live with a speaking or a singing voice, but not with a bellow or shriek pitched violently or ecstatically beyond the range of the human ear. This inhumanness is not a feature of the later verse only. It runs throughout Yeats' work. I have never been able to think of Yeats' work in the abstract or to read a number of poems concretely without receiving the impression of a sort of ghostly shining phosphorescence, and this impression puzzled me for a long time until I began to see its origin and meaning. It is this peculiar quality which imparts an atmosphere of unreality to his work. —*D. S. Savage*

( 13 )

Now although as Yeats developed he left behind this dim world of dreams and began to incorporate more of concrete imagery into his verse, and although a dreamy vagueness of mood gave place to the sharpness of disenchantment and bitterness or a kind of ironical joy nevertheless he retained his ineradicable tendency to exaggerated statement the effect of which was necessarily to place his poetry at a remove from human life and sympathy. Even in his midle period, his love-poetry is born out of a dramatic attitude rather that out of an honest relationship to experience. This exaggeration and over-heightening, this indulgence in dramatics, is exemplified by the repeated use of hyperbolic phrases and resounding words whose effect is to inflate the meaning. Some of Yeats' favourite words of his later period, "passionate," "rage", "turbulent," "frenzy," "murderous," "agony," "miracu-

lous," "bitter", "blind," "wild," he overworked no less than, during his early period, he overworked words like "dim," "dreams" "pale," "desolate," "sorrow" and the rest.

This hyperbolism of Yeats which on familiarity becomes wearisome and hollow, and which sometimes leads him into tremendous, nonsensical asservations, finds a counterpart in his lack of contemporaneity, itself a grave fault in any poet when, as nearly always, it signifies a poverty of observation which in turn reflects an incapability before the fullness of experience. On Yeats' part, it is certain that it does reflect an inability to overcome and bring into the scope of his art more than a strictly limited range of experience, namely, that which lends itself to a stylized "dramatic" treatment. It is not necessary to suppose that no modern poem can be regarded as valid unless it contains repeated references to pylons, gaselevators etc., to realize the truth that we live in a world which is full of these and similar things, that these, therefore, constitute much of the background of our experience, and that in mastering experience and translating into the terms of poetry we are bound to use the images with which experience presents us. Yeats ignores the contemporary scene, which means that he ignores much of his own experience, and when he attempts at times to incorporate a contemporary reference into his verse, requiring the exploitation of modern imagery, the result is not fortunate. *—D.S. Savage*

( 14 )

The earlier poems are remarkable for their dreamy sweetness and their traditional song-like, ballad rhythm, whether they are in ordinary iambics, like, "*The Song of Wandering Aengus*," or in the more haunting, curiously modulated cadence of "*The Lake Isle of Innisfree*." Very little of common life is admitted : the vocabulary is rather strictly limited to what would suit the general tonality of late-Victorian romanticism, and further limited in the effort to give the effect of Irish folk literature. In his later poetry

Yeats cultivates subtler, more varied and more dramatically, balanced cadence, his vocabulary is greatly enlarged with terms both vernacular and learned. The metaphors are fresher and taken from a vastly wider range of references and the imaginative structure is both more firmly wrought and more spontaneous and natural in effect. The "metaphysical" has come back, with its artful dissonances and its composition of contrasting tonalities. And the final effect is an enrichment of the early "glamour" with the help of the familiar and the difficult. In all this Yeats has been a leader in that school of writing which includes such names as *Eliot*, *Auden*, *Ransom*, *Stevens*, *Ronald*, *Boltrall* and *Dylan Thomas*. —*J. V. Breach*

( 15 )

Certainly, for the younger poets of England and America, I am sure that their admiration for Yeats' poetry has been wholly good. His idiom was too different for there to be any danger of imitation, his opinions too different to flatter and confirm their prejudices. It was good for them to have the spectacle of an unquestionably great living poet, whose style they were not tempted to echo and whose ideas contradicted those in vogue among them. You will not see, in their writing, more than passing evidences of the impression he made, but the work, and the man himself as poet, have been of the greatest significance to them for all that. This may seem to contradict what I have been saying about the kind of poetry that a young poet chooses to admire. But I am really talking about something different. Yeats would not have this influence had he not become a great poet : but the influence of which I speak is due to the figure of the poet himself, to the integrity of his passion for his art and his craft which provided such an impulse for his extraordinary development. When he visited London he liked to meet and talk to younger poets. People have sometimes spoken of him as arrogant and over-bearing. I never found him so ; in his conversations with a younger writer I always felt that he offered terms of equality, as to a fellow worker, a practitioner of the same mystery. It was,

I think, that, unlike many writers, he cared more for poetry than for his own reputation as a poet or his picture for himself as a poet. Art was greater than the artist : and this feeling he communicated to others ; which was why younger men were never ill-at-ease in his company.

—*T. S. Eliot*

( 16 )

The rhythms to which his mind moved were quiet and delicately precise. It has been said that Yeats had no ear for music. This may be true in the sense that he could not sing in tune nor catch the sound of his own voice speaking, but an ear for the cadence of verse is different, and this he certainly had. His rhythms are formal, not mechanical ; they hesitate often, like a mind feeling its way to exactitude rather than asserting a dogma, but they never lose their music. The lines are not cluttered with thick consonants where they should slide easily, nor do they ask the voice to dwell on a short sound too light to bear its weight of meaning. He is at ease with a slow, chanting, heroic measure, full of long monosyllables that ring like a ceremonial invocation. —*A. G. Stock*

( 17 )

A poet's characteristic rhythms are an expression of the frame of mind in which poetry comes to him. *Pope*, for whom poetry is a heightened form of social conversation, uses the neat antithetical balance of couplets to point his phrases, so that his most trivial thoughts sound like witticisms and his profoundest like casual repartees. *Shelley's* innumerable lyric tunes are, almost every one of them, single emotions heightened to ecstasy, the expression of a unique moment. *Swinburne's* rhythm is hypnotic, drowning thought in a monotonous tide of feeling generated by the sound of words. *T. S. Eliot*, and some other modern poets, commonly use rhythm less to induce emotion than to discourage it by a calculated flat anti-climax, as if to snub the expansiveness of the natural man. Yeats' rhythms at this stage of his work are half-entranced, like a

man walking alone lost in a train of visionary thought, or incantatory, as if he thought of poetry as a priestly vocation. —*Stock*

( 18 )

Many poets have boasted that they will immortalize the beauty of the woman they loved. Of most, all that we remember now is that there was beauty and that the poet was moved by it : the women themselves are shadows. The darkness of Shakespeare's mistress, Stella's black eyes framed in golden hair, the roses of innumerable cheeks—what do they all amount to, and what difference would it make beyond the turn of a sonnet, if the lady had been of a different colour ? A painter could have told us better. But if every painting of Maud Gonne vanished something of her would remain credible in Yeats' verses. He painted her as words can, dynamically, seeing her body as the projection of a quality of spirit which stirred him. —*Stock*

( 19 )

Yeats began as a late Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite with the additional advantage of contact with Irish mythological, tradition and folk culture. What is remarkable about his whole career is his sustained power of development. He could not remain a poet of the Celtic Twilight. In the second phase of his work represented by *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1889) and *The Shadowy Waters* (1890) he is making the Voyage Within, withdrawing as much as possible from the contemporary world and enriching his inner life by concentrating on purely visionary themes. This phase of his work is comparable with Hopkins' arduous spiritual training as a Jesuit. The religion which served as a means to purify and intensify Yeats' inner life was symbolism and the high priest of the great French Symbolist movement was *Stephane Mallrame*. Yeats was never a good French scholar but *Arthur Symons*' translations of Mallarme's poems were as useful to him as Golding's *Ovid* was to Shakespeare. Mallarme's religion was an austere worship of absolute beauty, which was to be reached by t he rapt contemplation of symbols. His poetry is a poetry

of suggestion from which all prosaic elements are banished. As *Dr. Bowra* has written, 'All preliminaries, explanations, comparisons are committed and the gain in concentration is enormous. The poetry is fully packed. It has some of the direct appeal of music.' Unfortunately, Mallarme had to create his own symbols as the traditional symbols of religion and mythology were dulled and hackneyed in the France of his time. —*Pinto*

( 20 )

In his later years, he (Yeats) withdrew from public life, travelled, saw those friends he cared to see and pursued his vocation. Poetry meant not less to him now, but even more. He wrote with no less passion, no less imagination, but with far greater force. His gentleness gave place to a sort of ironic fierceness and grim frankness. Something hard and earthy was substituted for the softness of the romantic lyricism of his youth. This later thing had a sterner ring of truth, a virility, a grip on experience as a whole, and he found a new idiom and a new imagery with which to express it. He had not given up his dreams, or even his spirits, or his wilder flights of imagination ; but it was now the imagination of a man who had trodden the earth, had known men and been undeceived about women (without ceasing to love them). His poetical excitement remains :

*Never had I more*
*Excited, passionate, fantastical*
*Imagination, nor an ear and eye ?*
*That more expected the impossible.*

In the last year of his life he was writing :

*When a man grows old, his joy*
*Grows more deep day after day.*

—*R. A. Scott-James*

( 21 )

The rebels of the revolutionary decade were intent on restoring wit and celebration to poetry. *Grierson's* great edition of Donne, published in 1912, came at just the right time to encourage the move towards the metaphysical poets, now esteemed for their toughness and complexity, their fusion of thought and passion. The pun returned to serious poetry for the first time since the seventeenth century : in the eighteenth century it had been scorned as 'low', and in the nineteenth it had been used almost exclusively in comic verse. The revival of the pun was not only an indication that for the new poets irony and even humour could co-exist with profundity and seriousness : it also reflected a concern with the 'ambivalence' of experience, with the paradoxes that lay at the heart of all significant human situations. In the 1930's, the younger American critics, bred in the new poetic tradition which saw Donne and Hopkins rather than Spenser and Tennyson as key-figures in the history of English poetry, were to proclaim that the language of poetry is inevitably and essentially paradox, an over-simplification deriving from the practice or preferences of the revolutionary poets of the immediately preceding decades.

The movement was international. Pound, the gadfly who slung many poets into a new activity, came from America and went to Italy ; Eliot, who soon became the central figure in the revolution, was an American who settled in England and became a British subject. Yeats, whose later poetry shows in its own remarkable way the influence of the new attitude, was an Irishman who never lost interest in or contact with the Anglo-Irish culture which bred him. The change in Yeats—attributable only partly to his having come temporarily under the influence of Pound and his friends—was most striking. He had begun as a dreamy romantic, seeking in a beautiful world of words compensation for the drabness of a world in which science had killed traditional values. 'I am very religious', he once wrote, 'and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion

of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible church of poetic tradition, of a fardal of stories, and of personages, and of emotions inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians."

—*David Daiches*

( 22 )

*The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair* (1933) represent the mature later Yeats at his very best—a realist-symbolist-metaphysical poet with a positively uncanny power over words. The two Byzantium poems *Sailing to Byzantium* and '*Byzantium*'—distil their meaning into a quintessence, haunting the mind and probing the emotions as no English poets had done since the seventeenth century. The theme of both poems is the attempt to compensate for old age by moving away from the teeming world of biological growth and change to the timeless world of art and intellect, a world of golden artefacts. '*Byzantium*' is also a poem about art, about the making of poems, about the relation of art and life. The poet subdues the flesh in the spirit, the world of nature is left behind for the 'glory of changeless metal' but even as he is astride the symbolic dolphin that carries him above the seething tide of human passion, that passion floods back : art is, after all, nourished by the very world of growth and change, of begetting and dying, that it wants to leave behind in its search for permanence ; the spirit is based on the mire and blood :

—*David Daiches*

( 23 )

"Indeed, it is a common criticism of Yeats as a man and a poet, that he lacked pity and his dismissal of poetry of the world war as a poetry of 'passive suffering' is perhaps an indication of hardness. The kind of human experience that will not take a strong and stylish mould of form, Yeats tended temperamentally to neglect ; and there is probably rather a large range of typical contemporary

human experience where his general advice to put a good face on things and to swagger seems silly and futile. And yet when that this been said, one still wonders whether the source of Yeats' greatness as a poet was really his ideas and not rather that temperament of his, harshly limited as it was. For if he lacked pity for those drab mass sufferings of our time, which so sadly do lack 'style', certainly, if he lacked, in a word, the humanitarian spirit, he certainly did not, in a broader sense, lack humanity. No poet of our time has loved and admired his friends more or incised their profiles for us in more firm and enduring verse.

—*Frazer*

( 24 )

One reads him (Yeats) also, and perhaps one specially reads him, for the reflection in his verse of a traditional culture with a tragic dignity about it : a culture still unified, still vital, still rooted in the soil, which (or the English analogy to which, surviving still in rural areas) no English poet of comparable stature expresses with comparable eloquence. There is, of course, the work of Hardy : but what Hardy has to say he expresses, if we compare him with Yeats, in a clumsy and stammering way. And Hardy's regretful rejection of the Christian faith, and if not exactly pessimistic, yet glum and grave pantheism which takes the place of the lost faith in his mind, if they lend themselves sometimes to a peculiar, slow, fumbling sincerity more 'honest', perhaps, in one sense, than anything in Yeats, who from Hardy's point of view would perhaps seem a brilliant charlatan—do not provide him with the framework that Yeats' occult philosophy provides for Yeats.

—*Frazer*

( 25 )

"So on the whole, I am ready to risk rashness, and to claim for Yeats the position of a major English poet, ranking with Donne, with Milton and with Wordsworth in the great succession. I thing he is very much greater than Browning or Tennyson or Arnold, and as I have said, he

has possibly more lasting qualities than poets like Pound or Eliot, who have for us today, with our particular problems of a megalopolitan society, a more urgent topical appeal. One tests this sort of things by personal experience : I bought Yeats' collected poems when I was in my teens. I carried them with me through my university days and through the war, I have them now ; and I find that I turn to them again and again for a kind of reassurance, a stimulation, a general keying up of my responses, which I can get from no other contemporary source." —*Frazer*

( 26 )

The widespread appeal *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* does not depend wholly upon response to the sentiment of the words. The studiously careful rhythmical structure is equally effective. Yeats freed himself from the metrical regularity he had previously observed, and gave attention mainly to securing a rhythmical basis which should allow scope for natural speech stress, and also for the general maintenance of natural word-order. Some use is made of repetition, but little of inversion. There is no rigid syllabic structure, the number of syllables in a line ranging from eight to fifteen. The emotional effect of the poems is also heightened by the subtle interaction of vowel-music and consonant—vowels, combining a preponderence of open vowels (sometimes further lengthened by the governing rhythm) with a judicious use of alliteration and sibilants, to suggest the bees and linnets, crickets and lapping water. This might seem, at first, to be no more than the familiar device of onomatopeia, but that device forms only the stern upon which a variety of other devices is grafted. Few modern poems can have had so much artistery lavished upon them as *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, but it and much of his work of that period was imbued with the romanticism which Yeats distrusted more and more as he aged. In a remarkable and unusual way he moved with the current of the times, and though—as his editorial preface to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1937) shows—he was capricious in his views on poetry, he had both sympathy and understanding for the younger generation of poets

whose deeds were so different from those of his own youth. Recurrently in the poems of his last years the continuing vigour of his mind and senses is in revolt against the enfeeblement of his body : 'lust and rage' were with him still to spur him into songs. His progress as a lyrical poet can be gauged from a comparison of *the Innisfree, Poem* (1895) with the more complex *Byzantium* (1930), the first having a plastic loveliness, the other a beauty that is not less but only less malleable in its suggestion. It was, particularly, the harder quality of beauty in Yeats' poems during his last phase that aligned him with the poets of the new age."

—*A. C. Ford*

(27)

"The word 'phantasmagoria' was one which Yeats, following Rimbauld, Baudelaire, and Poe, grew fond of during the 'nineties'. It designated for him that structure of related images through which, he could express himself, and through which, as he later said, "the dream and reality' might 'face one another in visible array. What was personal and transitory might be welded with what was impersonal and permanent through a group of images which had attracted men for hundreds of years. These images were phantasmagoric not in that they were illusory, but in that they represented, more than they participated in, the secret essence of things.

Because of his view of reality as consisting ultimately of moods, and of moods as having eternal or archetypal character, it is not easy to say precisely for what the phantasmagoric image stands. *A. G. Lehmann* has ingeniously defined the Yeatsian symbol entirely in terms of its effect as 'any representation serving as a sign of general attitude which either tradition or supernatural decree has invested with powerful, emotional resources'. The definition needs amending in two ways : the word attitude detracts from the symbol's self-sufficiency, and must yield to mood, that is the symbol serves as an aspect of the total mood of the poem. Moreover, the powerful resources of the symbol must be intellectual as well as emotional, for Yeats would not have countenanced purely emotional symbols.

—*Ellmann*

### (b) Yeats on his own art

(1)

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose foot-steps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they became, as it were, one sound, one colour one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion. The same relation exists between all portions of every work or art, whether it be an epic or a song, and the more perfect it is, and the more various and numerous the elements that have flowed into its perfection, the more powerful be the emotion, the power, the god it calls among us. Because an emotion does not exist, or does not become perceptible and active among us, till it has found its expression in colour or in sound or in form, or in all of these, and because no two modulations or arrangements of these evoke the same emotion, poets and painters and musicians, and in a less degree because their effects are momentary, day and night and cloud and shadow, are continually making and unmaking mankind.

(2)

Besides emotional symbols, symbols that evoke emotions alone,—and in this sense all alluring or hateful things are symbols, although their relations with one another are too subtle to delight us fully, away from rhythm and pattern,—there are intellectual symbols symbols that evoke ideas alone, or ideas mingled with emotions; and outside the very definite traditions of mysticism and the less definite criticism of certain modern poets, these alone are called symbols.

(3)

If people were to accept the theory that poetry moves us because of its symbolism, what change should one look for in the manner of our poetry? A return to the way of our fathers, a casting out of descriptions of nature for the sake of nature, of the moral law for the sake of the moral law, a casting out of all anecdotes and of that brooding over scientific opinion that so often extinguished the central flame in Tennyson, and of the vehemence that would make us do or not do certain things; or, in other words, we should come to understand that the beryl stone was enchanted by our fathers that it might unfold the pictures in its heart, and not to mirror our own excited faces, or the boughs waving outside the window. With this change of substance, this return to imagination, this understanding that the laws of art, which are the hidden laws of the world, can alone bind the imagination, would come a change of style, and we would cast out of serious poetry those energetic rhythms, as of a man running, which are the invention of the will with its eyes always on something to be done or undone; and we would seek out those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the emobodiment of the imagiontion, that neither desires or hates, because it has done with time, and only wishes to gaze upon some reality, some beauty; nor would it be any longer possible for anybody to deny the importance of form, in all its kinds, for although you can expound an opinion or describe a thing, when your words are not quite well chosen, you cannot give a body to something that moves beyond the senses, unless your words are as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious life, as the body of a flower or of a woman.

(4)

I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are:

(1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.

(2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.

(5)

I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half unconsciously by their successors, the poet, the musician and the artist. At first I tried to distinguish between symbols and symbols, between what I called inherent symbols and arbitrary symbols, but the distinction has come to mean little or nothing. Whether their power has arisen of themselves, or whether it has an arbitrary origin, matters little, for they act, as I believe, because the Great Memory associates them with certain events and moods and persons. Whatever the passions of man have gathered about, becomes a symbol in the Great Memory, and in the hands of him who has the secret it is a worker of wonders, a caller-up of angels or of devils.

(6)

Three types of men have made all beautiful things. Aristocracies have made beautiful manners, because their place in the world puts them above the fear of life, and the countrymen have made beautiful stories and beliefs, because they have nothing to lose and so do not fear, aud the artists have made all the rest, because Providence has filled them with reckessness. All these look backward to a long tradition, for, being without fear, they have held to whatever pleased them.

# 23

## *Important Questions*

Q. 1. Trace the evolution of Yeats' poetic genius clearly bringing out that the growth is continuous and sustained.

Q. 2. Show that Yeats' later poetry, "is the result of a continuous development and shows the final consummation of the poets' early endeavours."

Q. 3. Compare and contrast Yeats' early and later poetry and show that the germs of the later are to be found right from the beginning.

Q. 4. "No poet, not even the greatest, has shown a longer period of development than Yeats. Development to this extent is not merely genius, it is character." Elucidate.

Q. 5. "Yeats began as a late Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite with the additional advantage of contact with the Irish mythological traditions and folk-culture" (Pinto). Justify.

Q. 6. "Yeats' poetic powers underwent a process of slow but steady evolution." Discuss with reference to his early poetry.

Q. 7. Write an essay on the style and versification of W.B. Yeats on the basis of your study of his early poetry.

Q. 8 "Yeats' early poetry is in the thinned out romantic tradition of the 19th century". Clearly bring out the romantic element in the early poetry of Yeats.

Q. 9. Write a note on Yeats as a writer of ballads.

Q. 10. Estimate the influence of (*a*) the Pre-Raphaelites and (*b*) The English Decadents, on the early poetry of W.B. Yeats.

Q. 11. "Yeats' poetry is rooted in the English tradition." "Yeats is a great national poet of Ireland." Reconcile the two statements.

Q. 12. "The Wind among the Reeds" is Yeats' final poetry for poetry's sake, for Beauty's sake, and the swan song of his *fin de siecle* composition. How far is this estimate correct ?

Q. 13. Yeats had not "one" but "two" styles. Discuss with reference to his early poetry.

Q. 14. "There was a gradual evolution in Yeats' poetic powers, and the transition from the early to his later manner was achieved not abruptly, but by easy stages." Justify.

Q. 15. "The chief feature of Yeats' middle poetry is the reconcilement of opposites." Discuss with the suitable illustrations.

Q. 16. "Yeats' greatness as a poet is seen in the fact that he can enclose vast immensities within little space." Justisy.

Q. 17. Bring out the salient features of the style and versification of the poetry of Yeats' middle period.

Q. 18. Show that realism—an awareness of the facts of life—is the distinctive note of the middle poetry of of W.B. Yeats.

Q. 19. "Bitterness and disillusionment are key-notes of Yeats' poetry of the middle period." How do you account for this note of bitterness ?

Q. 20. "The poetry of the middle period shows an immense advance in technique. The poet has acquired mastery over his craft." Justify.

Q. 21. Compare Yeats' middle poetry with the earlier one and bring out its distinctive features.

Q. 22. Summarise the chief characteristics of the later poetry of Yeats.

Q. 23. Show that "Richness and Complexity" are the key-notes of the poetry of Yeats' maturity.

Q. 24. Write a note on the language and versification of Yeats' later poetry.

Q. 25. The key-note of Yeats' later poetry is the "reconcilement of opposites." How is this reconcilement brought about ?

Q. 26. What is symbolism ? Give an estimate of Yeats as a symbolist.

Q. 27. Estimate the influence of the French Symbolist Movement on Yeats.

Q. 28. "Yeats was a symbolist from the beginning to the end, and his symbolism increased in complexity with the maturing of his powers." Elucidate.

Q. 29. Symbols give, "dumb things voices, and bodiless things bodies." Justify.

Q. 30. "The poetic effect of the symbols of Yeats' maturity is one of vastness and continuous expansiveness." Discuss with illustrative quotations.

Q. 31. Give an estimate of Yeats as a lyric poet.

Q. 32. Analyse some of the love-lyrics of Yeats and bring out his greatness as a love-poet.

Q. 33. What are the distinguishing features of the lyrics of Yeats. Illustrate your answer from the lyrics you have read.

Q. 34. "Yeats is one of the greatest lyric poets of the 20th century England." Justify.

Q. 35. "Yeats' lyric poetry shows a gradual evolution from simplicity to greater and greater complexity and intricacy. There is a corresponding gain in intensity." Elucidate.

Q. 36. "Yeats' lyrics are characterised by simplicity of language, intricacy of design and pattern, depth of thought, and intensity of passion." Elucidate.

Q. 37. "Simultaneous compression and expansion is the key-note of some of the finest lyrics of W.B. Yeats." Amplify.

# 24

## *Suggested Readings*


1. Bhabatosh Chatterjee : *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (1962)
2. Richard Ellmann : *Yeats, the Man and the Mask* (1949)
3. Richard Ellmann : *The Identify of Yeats* (1954)
4. G.S. Fraser : *W.B. Yeats* (1962)
5. Joseph Hone : *W.B. Yeats* (1942)
6. A. Norman Jeffares : *W.B. Yeats, Man and Poet* (1949)
7. Louis Macneice : *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (1941)
8. V.K. Narayan Menon : *The Development of Yeats* (1942)
9. B.L. Reid : *W.B. Yeats* (1961)

Donald A. Stauffer : *The Golden Nightingale* (1949)

11. A.G. Stock : *W.B. Yeats, His Poetry and Thought* (1961)

12. John Unterecker : *Yeats, a Collection of Critical Essays* (1963)

13. Edmund Wilson : *Axel's Castle* (1931)

14. F.A.C. Wilson : *Yeats and Tradition* (1958)

15. B. Rajan : *W.B. Yeats a Critical Introduction* (1965)

16. James Hall and Martin Steinmann, editors : *The Permanence of Yeats* (1961)

17. C.M. Bowra : *The Heritage of Symbolism* (1943)

18. Graham Hough : *The Last Romantics* (1947)

19. F.R. Leavis : *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932)

0. V.S. Pinto : *Crisis in Modern English Poetry*

~~Text~~

KITAB MAHAL PUBLISHING CO.
URDU BAZAR LAHORE-PAKISTAN